CHECKMATE

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THE SYDNEY HORLER NOVELS

The House in Greek Street
The Formula
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Tiger Standish
The Man Who Shook the Earth
High Stakes
My Lady Dangerous
Gentleman in Waiting
Adventure Calling
Prince of Plunder
Princess After Dark
The Spy
Cavalier of Chance
Checkmate
Danger's Bright Eyes
Horror's Head
Vivanti Returns
The Evil Chateau
The Screaming Skull
Lady of the Night
The Secret Service Man
The Mystery of No. 1
False Face
The House of Secrets
Vivanti
The Black Heart
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Miss Mystery
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Excitement :
An Impudent Autobiography
Strictly Personal :
A Writing Man's Diary
Writing for Money :
The Blunt Truth about Modern Authorship



CHECKMATE

SYDNEY HORLER



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person.

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To

DIANA SHIRLEY MICHAEL JOSEPH

—The Darling.

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CHAPTER I MARY WRITES A LETTER

MARY's hands trembled slightly as she put the paper down. The vista which those few words of the advertisement conjured up made her catch her breath. As for the qualifications, she was certainly young and refined—and, yes, attractive. Poor Aunt Margaret had always said that she would quickly make a good marriage after she was gone. As for the fourth stipulation, she supposed she could call herself " well-educated "—anyway, she was going to risk it.

Sitting down at the rickety table, she drew a sheet of note-paper towards her and read the advertisement again :

SOUTH OF FRANCE: Lady wishes to engage companion. Must be young, refined, attractive, well-educated. D.M., Morning Mail, E.C.4.

With her fountain-pen in her hand, Mary looked out upon London. From where she sat she was able to see half of Bloomsbury Square. With the rain falling in a steady downpour, it was not

a pleasant vision. Huddled beneath absurdly small umbrellas, girls and women hastened by, looking pictures of misery; men strode past purposefully, a frown on their faces. Overhead, dark-grey, lowering clouds; underfoot, squashy puddles, with the relentless rain seeming to increase in volume every minute—in short, London on a typical January morning.

Turning away from such a gloomy prospect, Mary arranged her sheet of notepaper and began to write. It took some little time to compose a letter which satisfied her but eventually it was done.

Once the envelope was addressed and stamped, she experienced a slight feeling of misgiving. The thought came—how or why she could not tell—that that letter was to be the means of changing her whole life. Stupid, perhaps—but, nevertheless, she could not shake herself free of the idea. Should she tear it up?

Although the inclination to do so grew very strong—why was a second mystery—she resisted it. Indeed, determined not to yield to such a ridiculous dread (for such, unaccountably, it was), she rose, put on hat and mackintosh and left the house. A minute later, the letter of destiny was posted.

Mary hurried back to the boarding-house. The most imaginative could not have described her

bedroom luxurious, but it held a measure of comfort, especially on such a morning as this. And it was the only home she possessed.

Re-lighting the gas-fire, whose wheeziness caused the meter to devour shillings at a perfectly phenomenal rate, Mary settled herself in the cane easy-chair which she had purchased herself, and picked up the *Morning Mail* again. Her smooth white forehead became puckered; it was singularly strange how that feeling of misgiving should persist. The premonition that something unpleasant was about to happen to her would not have had its present significance but for the knowledge that she was to some extent psychic. At least four times in her life this uncomfortable knowledge had been forced home to her. The last occasion had been dramatically disturbing—the night before her Aunt Margaret died, the end had been revealed to her in a dream. And there had been other instances. . . .

But this present foreboding was absurd, she reassured herself; it was against common sense. That unromantic organ, the liver, could not be working properly. Yet she felt especially fit this morning.

She turned to the front page again. For years these Personal Column advertisements had been a source of interest to her. She used to read out the more intriguing ones to her aunt after break-

fast each morning. The romance of some of these "agonies"! And the sorrow.... The two columns of closely printed type seem to plumb the depths of human nature.

Many of these advertisements were very strangely worded. The ordinary person could not make any sense out of them. "If these things could be probed," her aunt had once said, "some extraordinary mysteries would be brought to light."

She had agreed with this view at the time. But the advertisement to which she had replied could not possibly come under this class. It was straightforward, plainly-worded, and easy to understand. There was nothing mysterious, surely, in a lady, presumably rich and fond of travel, desiring to engage a companion? How ridiculous!

Mary, for distraction, turned to the other pages. But the news, like the weather, was dull—apart from a reported fresh clue in a recent sensational murder, and the usual "scene" at a Socialist Conference, there was nothing sufficiently interesting to hold her attention. A play which had enjoyed a great deal of preliminary boosting had "flopped" at the first performance the night before. But, of course, there was nothing extraordinary in that.

Turning the sheet, Mary glanced down the

displayed advertisements. One at the top of a column caught her attention :

Mountains behind—with snowcaps far enough away for picturesqueness. The sapphire doormat of the Mediterranean spread in front . . . and down along the Cote d'Azur, those jewelled towns whose names alone conjure up delightful joys. . . .

In a flash, all doubt, all misgiving, all ridiculous foreboding left her—vanquished by the spell which those intoxicating words had cast. She was able to draw her own mental pictures—the hot sun pouring down on gaily-dressed crowds—of bathers diving into the bluest of blue seas, of yachts in harbour, of villas, with orange sun-blinds, set among palm trees, of mimosa growing everywhere. . . .

And she was going there for the first time !

It was Mary's native common sense which made her pause. She was allowing her imagination to run riot. A moment's reflection acted as a cold douche to this mental extravagance. Was she the only young, refined, attractive and well-educated girl who, reading that Personal Column advertisement, would be desirous of exchanging dirty, drab London for the sun-glorified Riviera ? There must be hundreds, thousands like her.

Amongst so many, what chance could she possibly have ?

A sense of despair came. In the letter she had confined herself to the barest details, thinking that was best. She wished now she had been more expansive.

Acting on a sudden impulse, she went to an old-fashioned cabinet which stood against the wall, unlocked a drawer and took out a photograph. It bore a famous West End name and was the best photograph she had ever had taken. Even her Aunt Margaret, a severe critic, had pronounced it " an excellent likeness—although perhaps inclined to flatter you, my dear."

Sitting down at the unsteady desk again, Mary hastily scribbled the following note :

DEAR MADAM,

I regret that I omitted to enclose a photograph of myself.

Yours truly,

MARY MALLORY.

The photograph was too large to be placed in an ordinary envelope, and the prospect of making another entry into the miserable world outside was anything but alluring ; yet Mary pulled on her mackintosh and clutched her umbrella with an

eager zest. Through the grey, depressing rain-charged clouds of the Metropolis, her imagination enabled her to see the radiance of the Riviera sun.

CHAPTER II THE MAN IN BROWN

THE rain lasted throughout the day, but the next morning broke clear and fine. After spending so much time indoors, Mary was glad of the chance to get some exercise. Since a girl she had dreamed of the joys of living in the country; if the choice had been left to her, she would have selected as her ideal home a cottage overlooking a golf-course. She would have liked to step from her breakfast-room on to the first tee. But this desire to get away from towns had never been realised: Aunt Margaret had lived in London all her life and always said she would die in it. She had done so.

There was only one letter on her plate. Her pulse beat quickly as she picked it up. One look at the hand-writing told her the correspondent—it was Jessie Stevens and not the advertiser of the *Morning Mail.*

The disappointment momentarily was intense. She must have shown it by her attitude, for George Lathbury, the elderly solicitor's clerk, who, seated on her right, was already finishing his meal, enquired in a sympathetic voice: "Not any bad news, I hope, Miss Mallory?"

She came to herself with a start.

"No, thank you, Mr. Lathbury—I was merely thinking about something—something which was too good to happen."

The solicitor's clerk rolled his napkin.

"I hope it will still be possible," he replied; "unfortunately, these things which promise so well are inclined to prove disappointments—at least, that has been my experience."

When the man had wished her good morning, and the shabby dining-room was empty except for the slatternly maid, whose ill-fitting shoes were always such an eyesore, Mary opened the letter. She had a swift conscience-pang as she scanned the well-known writing. Jessie Stevens and she had been friends ever since the Seaford schooldays. Although their ways had forced them to drift apart—Jessie was as rich as she was desperately poor—they had corresponded regularly and had met whenever possible. The present epistle was to say that Jessie, who had been staying with some friends in Surrey, was coming up to Town for a few days and would be glad

if Mary would meet her at Victoria at eleven-fifteen that morning.

"After the awful time you have been through, a little excitement will do you good—and I am going to see you get it," the short letter concluded.

Mary knew that the "awful time"—Jessie was a slave to the modern craze for exaggeration—referred to the recent death of her aunt, to whom she had devoted the last seven years of her life. Of course, it had been trying being tied to an invalid whose complaint had made her querulous at times, but the end had been peaceful. Now that the reaction from the long strain had come, however, she felt she wanted a course of enlivenment. She was still young—only twenty-four—and youth called for enjoyment.

The walk through the crisp air to the Marble Arch had a splendidly bracing effect, and by the time she got on the top of the 'bus, she felt in love with life. She had never begrudged the undeviating devotion to her aunt during those seven long years, but now that freedom had come, she found herself rejoicing in this new-found sensation, which was so novel that she still could not quite understand it.

Victoria Station, in her present mood, took on the semblance of a courtyard into a magic kingdom. The sight of the well-dressed throng was inspiring. Through this Gateway many of these

men and women were proceeding into the Unknown. What an adventure!

"There's the Continental express going out," she heard a voice say. Glancing discreetly round, she saw a poorly-dressed man standing by the side of a pale-faced girl. Both looked as though life was treating them harshly. There was an ache in the man's eyes as well as bitter envy in his voice. Perhaps—the thought came swiftly—the girl, the man's wife perhaps, was consumptive, and the doctor had said that the only chance for her was to get out of London and into the sun. From her heart she pitied them both.

A minute later she was experiencing emotion of an entirely different kind. Walking towards the big bookstall, she heard a sudden commotion behind. It sounded as though two men were fighting.

What she saw upon turning was startling. Holding, by the collar, a person so rat-faced that she guessed he must be a criminal of some sort, an immaculately-dressed individual was shaking his captive so violently that it seemed likely he would strangle him.

"You rotten little hound!" she heard the aggressor say.

Whilst she stood watching, a third man came on the scene. He was burly-figured and had a

purposeful air. Mary decided that he was probably a policeman in plain clothes—and her guess later proved to be correct.

He spoke to the man who still held the other's collar, and the well-dressed individual answered rapidly. After a brief conversation, the latter released his hold, and, to Mary's amazement, walked straight towards her.

"Pardon me, but I believe this is yours?" He held out a brown leather bag.

Mary's first action was to look at her left arm on which she had been carrying her bag. There was nothing there! Another glance and—

"Yes, it is my bag," she replied, "but I didn't realise it had been stolen. Was it that man?"

"I happened to be just behind when he sneaked up and cut the handle. It was cleverly done because, as you say, you didn't know what had happened. Then he darted off, but, fortunately, I was rather too quick for him. The man standing over there is a railway company detective. He would like to speak to you."

Feeling bewildered, Mary stammered a few words of conventional thanks which she knew were inadequate to the occasion, and then accompanied the man to the room off the plat-

form a few yards distant, where the railway detective was detaining his prisoner.

The officer wasted no words.

"I must ask you to accompany me to the station, miss."

"Why?" asked Mary.

"To prefer a charge of stealing, of course. Isn't that bag"—looking at the mutilated article which she was now carrying under her arm—"your property?"

"Yes."

"Then, in order to send this sneak-thief back to the prison he came from, it will be necessary for you to prosecute him."

A wave of dismay swept through her. She noticed the thief's eyes were fixed upon her face. They were unpleasant eyes—one of the most repulsive features of a repulsive face—but it was not the look of appeal in them which influenced her.

"I have no wish to prosecute him. I have my bag back, and"—in order to give some sort of substance to her case—"I am sure he is sorry for what he did."

The thief snivelled.

"I was starving, lydy, or I wouldn't 'ave bin tempted. Gawd bless your kind 'eart!"

"Shut up, Soapy!" adjured the detective in bitter contempt. "This man," the officer con-

tinued, addressing Mary, "is one of the worst thieves in the whole of London. Directly he is out of prison, he starts his old trick of hanging round railway stations and stealing ladies' hand-bags. You'll be neglecting your duty to the public, miss, if you don't prosecute."

"Please, lydy, I was that 'ungry!" whined the thief.

"I shall hit you, Soapy, if you don't shut up!" The detective turned to Mary again, and was plainly disgusted when the girl shook her head.

"I am sorry, officer, but please let him go. I should hate to think I was the means of sending anyone to prison."

The detective looked as though he would like to break into violent speech. Then, recovering himself with an effort, he pushed his prisoner fiercely away.

"Get out!" he cried; "and if ever I see your ugly mug near Victoria again, I'll run you in on my own responsibility for being a suspected person."

The man standing by the door made the speaker a mocking bow.

"Clever, ain't you, you blasted copper!" and then disappeared like a mischievous urchin before the enraged detective could cover the intervening space.

"If everyone was like you, miss," he said, frowning heavily, "the police force might just

as well be disbanded." With this severe admonition, he touched his bowler hat in merely perfunctory politeness, and walked out of the room.

"Did I do wrong?" Mary asked.

In putting the question, she was forced to look directly at the man whose action she had negatived.

She saw first a face with clean-cut features and a skin that held a glow which could only come from perfect health. To Mary, who placed physical fitness high in her order of essential things, this glow, which looked as though it might have been induced by the recent vigorous application of a scrubbing-brush, was rather fascinating. She had just time to confirm her first impression that the man had admirable taste in clothes—he was wearing a blue shirt and collar with a russet-brown tweed suit—when the stranger answered.

"You did exactly what I expected of you." The words were accompanied by a slightly quizzical smile.

"Then you're not annoyed with me?"

The smile ripened into a laugh.

"Annoyed? Good Lord, no! I'm not so impertinent."

"But I shouldn't consider it impertinence," she answered quickly; "after all, now I come to

think of it, I'm afraid I rather threw your good action back in your face. I'm sorry."

He reassured her with a smile which, softening the firm lines of his mouth, made his face even more attractive.

"But you mustn't be sorry. It would hurt me to feel that you were sorry about anything—least of all about the recent sordid episode. After all, you did quite right: it must be a horrible sensation to feel that you have been responsible for sending a fellow-being—even such a wretched specimen as friend Soapy—to gaol."

"You're a sportsman!" The tribute, frank and unconventional, was uttered before she quite realised what she had said.

"On the contrary, it's *you* who proved the sportsman," he replied; "I merely acted on impulse and in the heat of the moment."

A look at the clock on the wall recalled Mary to realities.

"I came here to meet a friend," she explained; "unless the train is late, she will be gone."

He stood aside to allow her to pass.

"That is—or was—my job, too."

Not a dozen yards from the room, Mary was met by a slightly indignant Jessie Stevens.

"Well, you're a nice one to meet a train!" remarked Jessie with characteristic impulsiveness. Then, seeing her friend's companion, she sobered.

Mary glanced at the man.

"I'll be getting along," the latter said. Raising his hat, he walked away.

Jessie, who confessed to having "an eye for a male," gazed after his straight back.

"You might have introduced me, Mary," she said with mock reproachfulness.

"My dear," came the confession, "I don't know him from Adam."

"Good gracious, child," scoffed the other girl, "you're actually blushing like a school kid—like school kids in our time used to blush, I mean; I expect they've given up the habit now. I scarcely thought you allowed strange men to get off with you like that. With an abandoned female like myself it would have been different. He was quite nice, though," she concluded; "I seem to have come on the scene at exactly the wrong moment. But, never mind, I expect you had time to fix something else up—I suppose you are seeing him again?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Jessie made a gesture of such vehement dismay with her umbrella that a passing porter nearly had an eye gouged out.

"Not seeing him again!" she repeated; "why, where was your sense? You won't get too many chances like that, young feller-me-girl."

"Jessie," expostulated Mary, "you are pos-

itively pagan. If you must know, the way that man and I met was because he saw a thief snatch my bag "—she held up the article for evidence— " and we both had to interview a detective."

The girl who made such a stunning show in her Lalonde clothes that passers-by turned to look at her again, caught hold of her friend's arm.

" But this is wonderful, my child !—a romance in real life ! Destiny in the shape of a man who wears blue shirts to match his brown eyes—did you notice how deeply, gorgeously brown his eyes were ?—has crossed your path ! You shall tell me all about it at lunch. I shall revel in the smallest details."

They lunched at the *Ritz*—Jessie had expensive tastes—and over the meal (which seemed to Mary to consist of the most delicious food she had ever eaten), the few simple facts were repeated.

Jessie became penitent when the brief tale was ended.

" And I spoilt it all ! If I hadn't butted in, he would have asked permission to present his card, you would have exchanged telephone numbers——"

" We should have done no such thing ! " protested Mary indignantly.

" Don't lie to me, child. I repeat, telephone numbers would have been exchanged, round about

tea-time a bouquet of red, red roses would have arrived at Bloomsbury and to-night you would have been dining *à deux* at the *Savoy*. What about me for a fortune-teller ?"

"Hopeless!" declared her listener; "you haven't a single fact right. Nothing of the kind would have happened. The man only did me a simple service—and now, please"—in a tone which caused Jessie to stop her bantering—"let us talk about something else."

"All right," said the obliging Jessie; "what show would you like to do this afternoon ? As I have sinned, let yours be the choice."

"Idiot!" replied Mary affectionately. She loved this girl who was so original that she combined good looks, a striking appearance, and a wonderful gift for clothes, with a sense of humour that often bordered on the outrageous. Blessed by the gods, possessing an ample fortune in her own right and a father who could be called upon for a further amount at any time, Jessie Stevens, who allowed herself perfect freedom of action at all times, seemed to her to be the luckiest person in the whole wide world.

After a brief argument, they decided on the latest Drury Lane triumph, the enormously successful musical play, "Wings of Love." This product of six authors and seven composers (for such is the custom nowadays) was playing to

capacity, but the waiter, whom Jessie sent to the telephone to enquire, was successful in engaging a couple of stalls.

Jessie, who had an infinite capacity for enjoyment—she loved clothes, food, good wine, expensive cars, and could dance throughout the night without tiring—revelled in the show. She had eyes and ears for nothing but the stage. To Mary, however, came a mood which was puzzling —and vaguely disturbing. A more incongruous place for a feeling of uneasiness than that packed auditorium it would have been impossible to imagine, and yet she experienced a distinct sense of fear. Why and how it had come she did not know. She told herself at first that her nerves had become unstrung through the incident at Victoria Station that morning, but that reassurance did not last long. It was not as though she suffered from nerves in the ordinary way; she had always enjoyed perfect health, and the usual feminine foibles of temperament had passed her by. She was magnificently normal.

It was certainly very strange, this unaccountable feeling of dread which had descended upon her, blotting out the pleasure which otherwise would have been so satisfying. And even more strange, perhaps, was the impression that in some unfathomable way, the man in the brown suit

was mixed up in what stretched ahead. For this fear which had laid its disturbing hand upon her dealt with the future and not with the present. It was a presentiment, and not a threat of an immediate visitation.

When the first interval arrived, Jessie turned to her.

"Don't you think Denis Danecourt is really marvellous?" she burbled; "do you know, he's something like that wonderful man of yours—oh, sorry, I've thrown another brick! I forgot you didn't want to talk about him any more, Mary," she added hastily. Then, after a pause: "But you're not looking at all well! Are you feeling all right?"

"Of course." She endeavoured to be her natural self again.

But when the theatre darkened for the second act, she felt again that disturbing grip of fear. It was as though she had been vouchsafed a look into the future.

She was in a large room . . . there were several men present . . . one had hold of her right arm . . . he was talking in a harsh voice, shattering to the nerves . . . treating her rudely.

Another man, who seemed his superior, now spoke. The words he said were frightening—so frightening that she gave a cry.

"You ass, what on earth's the matter?"

She was brought back to reality by Jessie's enquiry.

"Nothing. I felt . . . Oh, it was nothing, Jess, really."

She dared not tell the truth. It was eerie that this second premonition should have come. What was going to happen in the future? Had Fate sent her a warning?

A few seconds later the curtain rose again on the lighted stage, and the dark, evil picture vanished like the uneasy fabric of a frightening dream.

CHAPTER III ON THE THRESHOLD

JESSIE had decided to stay at a small and exclusive hotel in Dover Street rather than go to her father's house in Brook Street—"with the old chap away, it would resemble a mausoleum too much for my liking"—and it was there that she took Mary from the matinée.

In a corner of the exceptionally comfortable lounge, after ordering tea, she told her guest of her plans for the immediate future.

"Hark to Jessica's prayer," she said. "I

intend to be in Town for at least a fortnight, and I'm going to spend every minute with you. Isn't that too sweet of me? Say it is! Now, listen, stupid," she went on imperiously, as Mary was about to speak, "I shan't be bored and I shan't want anyone else. I wonder what you would say if I told you what was in my mind?" she continued, looking mischievously across the small table.

Mary declined to hazard a guess.

"Goodness knows; you get such extraordinary ideas. You always did as a kid, I remember."

"Let me tell you, miss, that this idea deserves to be patented, it's of such first-rate quality. Well, I won't tease you any more, Mary, darling, but I'll let it explode straight away."

She paused sufficiently for the ensuing words to be dramatic, and then launched her thunderbolt.

"I want you to be my companion, Mary," she said. "I recognise the value of the required article, and I'm willing to go high—you can fix your own salary, beloved."

Although the last words were said in a tone of banter, beneath which could have been detected a deep note of sincere affection, Mary coloured. In a flash the difference in their positions was revealed, and in a manner which left her with a pain at her heart.

"Oh, but I couldn't," she replied, voicing this hurt.

Regardless of the waiter who was bearing down upon them with a loaded tea-tray, Jessie stood up and waved an admonitory finger.

"Now, don't you be a fool," she said. "I have been saving this up for so long that if I hadn't out with it to-day, I should have burst. And why this 'no—no—I cannot!' stuff?"

Mary waited until the waiter had retired.

"I love you awfully, my dear, as I hope you know, but I couldn't accept your charity—and what you propose, although it's tremendously sweet of you—would be charity."

The auditor flung up both arms.

"Sweet suffering cats!" she exclaimed, "did mortal woman ever hear such blither? So long as your aunt was alive I wouldn't have thought of proposing it, but now she's gone and you are free, the dearest wish of my life is to have you as a constant pal." The speaker's manner was now quite serious. "Can I help it, old thing, because I happen to have the money? If it was the other way round, I know you would have made the same offer. Please don't be silly, Mary. Strange as it may seem, I get terribly lonely at times, and I should like you always about."

"It's frightfully decent of you to put it like that, Jess, but——"

The other girl tossed her head.

"Very well, we won't discuss it any more. Not now, at any rate. If I can't have you always, I intend to have you for the next few days. After you've had another cup of tea, you're going to get into a taxi and drive to that wretched boarding-house, and then you will push sufficient togs into a bag to last you a fortnight."

"And the reason?"

"It ought to be plain enough; you're going to be my guest at this hotel for the same fourteen days."

"Jess, how lovely!"

Her friend viewed her from over the top of a tea-cup.

"Quaint child, aren't you? I offer you a life job and the constant devotion of a doting heart, and you turn it down. Oh, well! Ready for the trek?"

"Quite."

"Shall I come with you? I will, you know."

Mary shook her head. She couldn't allow Jessie to see the Spartan simplicity in which she had to live.

"No—you go and have that bath you're aching for. I shall be back in less than an hour."

"I should jolly well think you will; if you're a second longer than forty minutes, I'll ring up the nearest police-station."

The first thing Mary saw when she entered her room was the letter propped up on the mantelpiece. Dorothy, the maid, was a good soul; she was always doing little acts of kindness like that—she had taken this trouble in order to ensure that the envelope should be seen directly she entered the room.

The envelope was of white, thick paper, faintly but very distinctively perfumed. Inside was a small sheet of paper to match.

107A, *Hanover Street, W.*1.

The Comtesse Zamoyski presents her compliments to Miss Mary Mallory and will be pleased if she will make an appointment to call with reference to her application for the post of companion.

Mary's heart, after appearing to miss several beats, began to throb rapidly. The Comtesse Zamoyski! How grand it sounded—too grand, in a way, because she was afraid she would not be able to keep up with such magnificence! What nationality could the woman be? The name sounded either Russian or Hungarian, or perhaps she was a Serb. She pictured an exotic creature lying stretched on a bearskin rug, lazily smoking a perfumed cigarette—the type of woman Elinor Glyn had used to write about.

But she must see her! Yes, she must see her.

The letter meant that she had at least a good chance of getting the post. No doubt the Comtesse had written other notes of acknowledgment and it was too early yet to begin counting any chickens—but, still, she had a chance! And the fact that the woman had sent such a quick reply was additionally encouraging.

She sat down on the side of the bed and read the few words again. The writing was interesting to study—with its bold, sweeping capitals and thick downward strokes, it appeared full of character; she found herself becoming fascinated by it. Speculation as to the kind of woman the Comtesse Zamoyski might be again filled her thoughts. The task of packing was forgotten.

Assuming that this job was offered her, would she accept it? This was the question she now asked herself. A great deal would depend upon the woman, of course, but the prospect of escaping from London for a while and sampling the joys of a country that had been called the Millionaires' Playground, became almost irresistible. And she would be independent; small as her salary must be—she had no illusions about that—she would be earning her living. Jessie was a dear—but, no, she couldn't accept her charity. However skilfully Jessie might put it, the fact remained that she would be living off the rich girl's friendship. It was stupid, perhaps, but

she was sensitive on the point and nothing would shake her.

. . . will be pleased if she will make an appointment . . .

Glancing at the note again, the phrase caused her to jump up quickly, and begin opening drawers at a furious rate.

She could call at Hanover Street on her way back to the *Jules Hotel.*

She finished her packing quickly, cramming what she considered necessary into a couple of suit-cases, and then hurried downstairs to where the taxi which had brought her from Dover Street was waiting.

"I want you to go first to 107A, Hanover Street—do you know where it is?"

"I should say I do, miss—off Hanover Square."

"I imagined it might be. I shan't be there long and then I want to go back to the *Jules Hotel* in Dover Street."

"Very good, miss."

It had always fascinated Mary to drive through London in a taxi. To look upon the maelstrom of traffic, to hold one's breath as what looked to be certain collisions were avoided through the extraordinary skill of the driver; to watch the

multitude of faces that passed, probably never to be seen again—these things had always filled her with a certain wonder.

This particular evening the ride became invested with an even greater interest—she was going to meet a woman who held in her hand the passport to a great adventure.

The journey did not pass without excitement. In turning the corner from Hanover Square, the taxi just escaped a really nasty accident. A car, recklessly driven, lunged out from Hanover Square, and it was only the driver's quickness in swerving that avoided what appeared to be an inevitable crash. Mary, holding her face with her hands, had resigned herself for the worst when the driver, with a shake of his head like a growling dog, passed on.

"Here we are, miss," he said, a couple of minutes later. He had stopped the taxi and now stood holding open the door.

"Thank you, driver."

There was nothing distinctive about the house, which looked from the outside as though it consisted of one or more service flats on each floor. There was a man in uniform lounging in the doorway.

"The Comtesse Zamoyski?" asked Mary.

The hall-porter-cum-liftman, for such he proved to be, glanced at her curiously, Mary thought,

before he replied briefly: "First floor—shall I take you up in the lift?"

"If you will, please."

"Straight opposite," said the laconic attendant, as Mary stepped out.

With the disappearance of the man, a feeling of desolation came to her. It was absurd, of course, for the lift had merely descended again to the ground level, and she told herself not to be a fool.

To the right of the door to which she walked was a brass plate with the words:

HILDA BLAKE

inscribed on it.

There are few more unsatisfactory sights than a cloudy brass plate, and this particular specimen could not have been cleaned for several days—it might have been weeks. Mary's mouth unconsciously formed itself into an expression of disgust.

Then above the plate she noticed a visiting card. This was pushed in the space between the badly-fitting plate (the screws had become loose) and the wall. On the card she read the words:

THE COMTESSE ZAMOYSKI.

She stood looking at the card. That feeling

of desolation which had attacked her when she stepped out of the lift increased. Curious what powerful impressions the small things of life can make. That neglected brass plate, for instance, how slovenly, how unclean, how generally unsatisfactory. . . .

But the woman she had come to see could not be blamed for that—what a senseless idea! No doubt she had taken the flat furnished for a short term, as was done so often in London. The dirty plate could only be due to the neglect of a servant. Still . . .

To put an end to her irresolution, Mary pressed the bell. As she did so, she fancied she heard the sound of a stifled sob. This must have come from the other side of the door. Involuntarily she stepped back, for the evidence of distress impressed her as having a sinister sound. And as she did so, a voice within her breast seemed to utter a warning: "Go back! Go back!"

She was already looking at the stairs which led down to the street when the flat door opened. A smartly-dressed maid, neat with cap and apron, and with silk stockings displaying her extremely shapely legs beneath very short skirts, was looking at her enquiringly. To run away now would be absurd.

"I have called to make an appointment with the Comtesse Zamoyski." In making the state-

ment, Mary walked forward. She noticed that the girl's eyes were red as though she had been weeping. That stifled sob . . .

"I will tell Madame the Comtesse," the maid replied; "will you please come in. Your name, please?"

So strong was the inclination not to enter the place, that Mary involuntarily hesitated. Then feeling that the maid would wonder what was in her mind, she stepped into the small hall.

"Please tell the Comtesse that Miss Mary Mallory has called."

"If you will please wait. . . ." The maid went along the narrow hall, took a turning to the right, and vanished.

Looking round her, Mary decided that, judging by the manner in which this hall was furnished, the Comtesse Zamoyski could not be very wealthy. The stuff in it once might have been good, but now it matched the outside plate; it was distinctly shabby.

But if the flat had been taken furnished, that might be the explanation.

Mary had just arrived at this reflection, which she was endeavouring to make comforting, when she was aware that someone was standing near her. As she had not heard any approach, the effect, as she swiftly turned, was somewhat disturbing.

"I beg your pardon!"

If she had expected to see the Comtesse Zamoyski—she was not sure who or what she had expected—she was mistaken; it was a man who was regarding her in a manner which, because she had no time to think of a better word, she could only describe as being intense.

"I regret very much if I startled you, Miss Mallory—it is Miss Mallory, I believe?"

"Yes—I called in answer to the note the Comtesse Zamoyski kindly sent me."

"In regard to the vacant post of companion. Yes, I remember." The man smiled. "I should explain," he added, "that I am the Comtesse's nephew. I also act as her secretary, and am seeing you now on her behalf. Will you come this way, please?"

Within the next minute Mary found herself in a sitting-room. The furnishing of this apartment struck the same shabby note as the hall.

As though reading her thoughts, the man shrugged his shoulders.

"We were deceived by the agents into taking this horrible place. Did you ever see such furniture? How people can live in hovels like this it is impossible to conceive—and what is even more difficult to understand is how they have the audacity to ask the rents they do. But I bore you. You have called on a business matter.

I am the bearer of the Comtesse's compliments. She regrets that she is indisposed and thus unable to see you."

"Then I'll be going." She told herself she did not mind being turned down; and it would be a relief to get out of that flat into the clean, fresh air.

"But pardon, Miss Mallory, I have been deputed by the Comtesse to interview you in her place. Perhaps you would be sufficiently kind to give me a few details concerning yourself which I could put before the Comtesse?"

Still standing, Mary considered before making any reply. She did not like this man any more than she liked the flat. He was courtesy itself—but the courtesy was rather overdone. His manner was too suave. This, coupled with his impeccably-fitting clothes, placed him in the class that Jessie Stevens had once graphically described as the "too, too men." In brief, he seemed scarcely fitted for the rough and tumble of ordinary existence and yet there was a snaky quality about him which gave her distrust.

"I think I have changed my mind," she said; "I received another offer to-day. No doubt you have had many other applicants."

He lifted elaborately-manicured hands, whose soft whiteness seemed unnatural in a man.

"Oh, yes, a great number," he answered, "but

so many were hopeless. I pray you, Miss Mallory, to reconsider. Without going any further, I think I can commit myself sufficiently to say that you are exactly the type of young lady the Comtesse would desire as a companion. Now, please sit down again."

Partly because she found herself amused and partly because her curiosity had been aroused, Mary complied. A few matter-of-fact questions followed. There was nothing about these to cause any misgiving—where she was educated, her previous posts (if any), her knowledge of languages.

"You speak French fluently, you say," commented the elegant secretary—by this time Mary had decided he was merely an effeminate type and that the disturbing quality in him was largely the result of her imagination; "that is certainly an advantage. The Comtesse entertains a good deal when on the Riviera; if I may make the remark without offence, your charm and freshness, Miss Mallory, will appeal to her friends."

There was something about the remark she did not quite care for—compliments which had an insinuating side to them like this she had always considered rather insulting. Her sense of uneasiness returned.

"Aren't you taking too much for granted?"

she replied; "even though the Comtesse should offer me the post, I do not know that I could accept it."

Again the white hands were upflung in protest.

"I shall be desolated if you maintain that attitude, Miss Mallory. I consider you in every way suitable for the post, and I shall have the utmost confidence in recommending you most warmly to the Comtesse. Indeed, so positive am I that she will approve my action that I am willing to offer you now a commencing salary of £300 a year. All expenses will be paid, of course. What do you say?"

"I will think about it and let you know."

His Elegance seemed to be on the point of losing his suavity. Then, quickly, he recovered.

"The Comtesse is leaving very soon for Cannes, and she is desirous of engaging a companion in London."

"I must take the risk of her choosing someone else. Will you give me twenty-four hours in which to make up my mind?"

"Twenty-four hours, then." There was now a hint of acerbity in the man's voice. "I promise that Madame the Comtesse shall not engage anyone until after"—he looked at his watch—"six-thirty to-morrow evening."

He rose and held open the door.

"Should you decide to call to-morrow evening,

I trust the Comtesse will be sufficiently recovered from her indisposition to be able to see you."

To this Mary made no answer. She felt she wanted to be alone to think.

At the front door of the flat, the Comtesse's secretary made her a bow.

"I hope to see you again, Miss Mallory."

"Good night," was all the reply she gave.

"Where in the Halifax have you been?" demanded Jessie.

"Seeing after a job." Mary, actuated by two motives—one to be quite frank concerning what had been in her mind, and the other to get another opinion—spoke the words with a disconcerting frankness.

Jessie was certainly disturbed. She stared at the speaker as though she imagined Mary had gone suddenly mad.

"'Seeing after a job'?" she repeated; "what on earth are you footling about?"

Mary smiled.

"I'm perfectly serious. Now that Aunt Margaret's gone, I must do something. The £100 a year she left me isn't sufficient to live on."

Jessie, looking ravishing in her *crêpe de Chine* undies, turned from the dressing-table where she was putting the finishing touches to an already perfect complexion.

"I seem to remember that I made you some sort of proposition myself over tea," she said coldly.

Mary's conscience became lively.

"Darling, don't feel hurt—*please!*" she pleaded. "I thought it perfectly dear of you, but, Jess, sweet, my independence is about the only thing I have—and I feel I can't give that up. The reason why I didn't mention this at tea was because I hadn't been actually offered the post, but to-night everything's been definitely fixed up. I called on the way back here and was told I had been chosen out of hundreds. Jess, you can imagine how excited I am!" Something which she could not control made her run on and say more than she had intended.

Jessie's first comment was hardly encouraging.

"When you came in five minutes ago, you didn't seem very excited; you looked as though you had seen a ghost. You were so pale, as a matter of fact, I thought you must be ill."

"That was because I was all bubbly inside." Now that she had set out to impress Jessie, she must continue in the same strain.

The coldness did not leave her friend's face.

"What is this precious job?" she asked.

"Companion to a Comtesse who is shortly leaving for Cannes. Do try to see my point of

view, Jess," she went on. "When Aunt Margaret died—I don't want to pose as a martyr, but I had a pretty hard time of it with her——"

"Putting two and two together, I should imagine you had a perfectly horrible time," broke in the other girl.

As she spoke, she looked at her friend keenly. She saw a girl, slim, but gracefully formed. A girl frank, clear-eyed. A girl to whom Life was obviously making a call with its promise of enticement. Mary seemed poised—on the threshold of things, looking forward with ardency to what the future held for her. Self-centred as she was, Jessie felt a pain at her heart.

But now Mary was replying.

"Yes, it *was* difficult sometimes," she said. "But, as I was saying, when the end came—and it was really a blessing because the poor old dear had suffered terribly—I made up my mind to have a foreign holiday. For years, whenever I read the advertisements in the papers, I had resolved one day to go to the South of France."

"I could have gone with you—and been pleased to pay all exes."

"Oh, I know!" Mary made a gesture of hopelessness; "but . . . Jess, dear, do try to understand."

"Well, push on," said the other.

"Yesterday morning, when I was reading the

Morning Mail, I saw an advertisement which made me change my mind."

"About going to the Riviera ?"

"No, I still intended to go, but I decided that if I could get someone else to pay my expenses, so much the better. Not a friend, Jess, darling," she added quickly, "an employer.

"This advertisement was in the Personal Column—you know how fascinating the *Morning Mail* Personal Column is—and stated that a lady, starting shortly for the South of France, wanted a young, refined, attractive and well-educated girl as a companion. She turns out to be a Comtesse Zamoyski."

"Sounds like the name of a snake-charmer in a touring circus. What's she like ?"

"I haven't seen her yet," Mary had to confess ; "when I got home just now, I found this note "—she passed it over for inspection—"but when I called at the flat in Hanover Street, she was ill or something. I saw her secretary."

"Male or female ?"

"Male."

"Did he wear a tight-waisted coat, possess an ingratiating manner, a small black moustache, and white, manicured hands ?"

"Jess !" It was as though the speaker had actually been present at that unpleasant interview.

Her friend nodded sagely.

"My advice to you, Mary, is to steer clear," she said bluntly. "I don't want to frighten you, but this looks very much like a case of White Slavery. The swine—excuse my bad Italian—are up to all kinds of tricks. No, don't start glaring at me; I'm serious."

"Jess! You're mad!"

"No, I'm not. Let me deal out a little more frankness; I think you want it. For the past seven years—the most important years in your life, perhaps—you have been practically cut off from the world. You have been chained to the side of an invalid whose outlook was unmistakably pre-Victorian, if not actually mid-Georgian. Your aunt had about as much knowledge of the modern world as a grasshopper with sleeping-sickness. And she kept you in much the same state. You may retort that you tried to keep yourself up to date by reading the newspapers, but, to all intents and purposes, you are a perfect little innocent. And yet you calmly contemplate rushing blindly into the first trap that is set for attractive girls."

Mary's face flamed indignantly.

"It isn't a trap—and, Jess, do you know that you are rather rude?"

"Can't help that, old thing; I'm doing the Dutch uncle business purely for your own good. If you knew more of life, Mary, you'd have seen

through this business right away. It looks very fishy to me; if I were you, I'd put the police on to this flat in Hanover Street."

"You don't know what you are saying!"

"Very well," with an eloquent shrug of the shoulders; "have your own way." Then the speaker put a lovely bare arm round the other girl's neck.

"I'd hate for you to make a mistake, darling!" she said, with such earnestness that Mary's anger vanished.

"Don't let's talk about it any more," she pleaded; "if we do, it will spoil the evening."

"I refuse to allow anything to affect my dinner," responded Jessie, with a return of her old manner; "it is proposed, seconded and carried unan., then, that no further mention be made of the Comtesse Zamoyski—the cat!"

But the mischief had been done. A strained atmosphere prevailed. This persisted throughout dinner, and even cast its shadow over the performance of "Unlovely Woman," the most absorbing play then being staged in Town.

Both were conscious of it. Both tried to bridge the gulf, but their very conscientiousness defeated its purpose.

At the end of the show, Jessie suggested going on to a famous dance club.

"You've never been, I suppose?" she queried.

Mary shook her head.

"No—never."

"Then it will form part of your new education."

The words, uttered lightly enough and apparently without any inner meaning, stung the already sensitive listener.

"If you don't mind, Jess, I'll go back to the hotel. If I went, I should only be a wet blanket, feeling as I do to-night."

Jessie summed up the situation with candour.

"The truth is I've got on your nerves. All right, I'll go along to the Rosy Dawn myself. To-morrow we shall both feel better." She kissed her companion as the ordered taxi pulled up at the pavement.

"I suppose I'm a selfish and dictatorial creature," she added with a smile, "but that is the nature of the beast."

Tears came into Mary's eyes when she was alone—and it was these tears which influenced her in writing a letter to the Comtesse Zamoyski directly she got back to the *Jules Hotel*.

It was a short note, stating simply that, if the post of companion was still open, she would be pleased to accept it.

The gods of mischance must have grinned when she slipped the letter into the hotel post-box.

CHAPTER IV — WINGATE THINKS OF A GIRL AND MEETS A MAN

When Bob Wingate walked away from Mary Mallory at Victoria Station, he turned in the direction of the bookstall. There were still five minutes before the Eastbourne train was due. But for his man's mistake in telling him the time, he wouldn't have arrived so soon.

And if he hadn't been twenty minutes too early——? As he purchased the latest novel by his favourite author—a man who contrived to make the characters in his adventure tales behave as living persons and not merely as mechanical puppets—he asked himself whether he was glad or sorry that he had met that girl with the appealing face. As for her friend, she was a more or less familiar type: he could see her kind at the Rosy Dawn any supper-time.

But the other. She was entirely different. In fact, she was on the way to being unique. Slipping the book under his arm, he strolled down the platform to wait for the South Coast express which was now signalled.

He was going to meet one of the most interesting men of the day—a man for whom he had a genuine affection and hadn't seen for nearly three months—but his mind was not on Lord Delabrae.

He found himself summing up the qualities of the girl he supposed he would never meet again. If her pal—talkative devil, that—hadn't breezed up, spilling so much gas, he might have had sufficient presence of mind to give her a card and gently suggest that another meeting wouldn't shatter all the conventions to atoms.

Would he have had any luck? It was impossible to say, for this girl, with all her frankness—how her face had lit up when she called him a sportsman!—believed in the conventions. The decent ones, anyway. That had been pretty plain. A fellow, to keep her respect, would have to step carefully. Well, damn it, he hoped he knew how to behave decently to an utterly delightful girl. What a fool he had been to cut away so abruptly. If he had stayed—who knew? The pal looked as though she would have been ready and willing to get together, and through her he might have got to know the name and address of the other. Now—well, the best thing he could do was to push the whole matter out of his head. It wasn't likely that he would ever see the girl again.

Robert Wingate possessed about the usual number of faults and virtues of his type. Whilst certainly not a prig, he could not with justice have been placed in the saintly category. He enjoyed life to the full, but he had a certain code

to which he adhered. Briefly, it was this: he was always prepared to be amused by a girl who was "goey," provided she was sufficiently attractive, but no girl of the stricter class had ever had cause to regret getting to know Bobby Wingate. There were certain unwritten rules in the game, and this was one of them. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, he barred married women—which is to say he respected them even when they didn't respect themselves. One day—if ever he did get married—he would be able to look into his wife's eyes without undue shame, which is as much as any man, born of woman, can hope to do. If he tries to do more, he may come a nasty cropper. You have to lead human nature; you cannot drive it; if you do, it has a habit of kicking back.

A man wearing a monocle and a smile which seemed to light up the whole platform with its gleam was bearing down upon him in determined fashion.

"Bobby, you crazy old fool!" Anyone not familiar with that striking personality, Lord Delabrae, might have imagined that the traveller was administering a rebuke, but Wingate, who knew that terms of opprobrium with Delabrae merely signified affection, grinned appreciatively in reply. These two had been at Eton and Christchurch together, and the friendship formed

as schoolboys had strengthened with the years.

"Good of you to turn up," said Delabrae, when they were comfortably installed in Wingate's Sports Rolls.

Bobby gave another grin. There was no need for any fulsome speech between these two. If either had hinted that he would like the other to meet him at a certain hour in California, Alaska, Indo-China or the Straits Settlements, that other, it is pretty safe to say, would have been there on time. Real men's friendships are like that.

"Drop me at the club, old boy, will you?" said Delabrae, when the car spun round into the slope of St. James's Street; "I shall be infernally busy until late afternoon, but we'll spend the evening together."

"Righto! What time? Where?"

"Carlton Grill, seven-thirty."

"Good enough."

The Rolls slid away.

The Rosy Dawn is a very famous night club. Englishmen, living alone with natives in the African bush, are said to murmur the name in their sleep. It is discreet, but one can have all the excitement one requires—especially after one o'clock in the morning. What the Empire

in Leicester Square used to be to the old *voyageur*, the Rosy Dawn is to his modern counterpart.

The company is mixed, but extremely smart. Owners of names illustrious in Society and famous K.C.'s pass on the dance-floor women of the town and master crooks. But the clientele of Joseph, the suave *ex-maître d'hôtel*, who left the *Madrid Hotel* to run this swagger night resort, is invariably the best-dressed in London. What is more, there is rarely, if ever, any "scene." The team work at the Rosy Dawn is excellent. Everyone knows that, for all his charming *bonhomie* and good fellowship, Joseph is an autocrat. To offend him once is equivalent to being barred from the Rosy Dawn in the future.

"I ought to get some work done," remarked Delabrae, when Wingate and he left their club after a rather expensive two hours of bridge, "but what about looking in at the Rosy Dawn?"

"Suit me," concurred Bobby; "I should think it would seem pretty tame to you after breezing about in New York, though."

"Oh, I don't know—I'm glad to be back. I had a great time in America, but it's too much like living on a straight diet of champagne. Besides, I missed my golf. Shall we walk?"

"Yes, it will do you good. You're putting on weight again."

"Too much loafing. I'll be down at Sunningdale in the morning."

As they turned the corner from Piccadilly into Bond Street, a man to whom Delabrae had cheerfully nodded scowled in return.

"Wasn't that Grant?" asked Wingate.

"Yes, I believe it was his homely mug."

"Why the scowl?"

"Oh," laughed the other, "he's one of those who consider that since I've been doing my stuff for the *Sun* I've lost all consideration to being treated as a human being. I'm lower than the animals."

Wingate grinned in appreciation.

"Run after by half the world and cut by the other half—that appears to be your present position. But you don't seem to worry."

"Worry," repeated Delabrae with a laugh, "I wouldn't change places with any man in London. Hello! here's Joseph."

They had passed the stalwart commissionaire by this time and were in the vestibule of the club. An olive-skinned man in immaculate evening dress hastened up to them.

"It is a very great pleasure to see you again, your lordship—and you, too, Mr. Wingate. I am honoured." Bowing to them, the speaker turned away to greet other visitors.

Victor, the head waiter, who greeted Delabrae

with equal enthusiasm, found them a corner table on the balcony. Already the dance-floor below was comfortably filled.

"If ever I really wanted money badly," commented Delabrae, as he surveyed the scene, "I could get a tidy amount by turning Society blackmailer. My hat, if only I dared print half the stories that concern the intimate lives of this crowd!—they would put millions on the circulation of the *Sun*."

"Yes," replied Wingate, "and land you in the Old Bailey dock for criminal libel."

The rejoinder was ignored by the Society journalist.

"There's that Pilchester woman—sixty if she's a day—galumphing round with a chorus-boy from Cochran's new revue—golly, what a life! . . . I say, excuse me, old boy, there's a girl down there I haven't seen for an age. She looks lonely—get on with your supper, will you? I'll be back in two ticks."

Wingate, who was accustomed to such abrupt departures, shrugged his shoulders.

"Carry on, Lothario!"

"Which is a most disgusting libel upon a perfectly respectable person—meaning myself," replied Delabrae.

Two minutes later the latter was greeting a very charming girl.

"So you're back," said Jessie Stevens.

"Just. Came up from the family mausoleum at Eastbourne this morning after landing at Southampton on Saturday."

"Did you like the States?"

"What I saw of it. But the thing's too big to be seen properly by one pair of eyes. Where's the attendant cavalier?"

"I came alone to-night. I wanted to bring a friend—such a sweet little mouse-kid—but she developed nerves and would go back to the hotel. By the way, Dick, you know everything."

"You flatter me."

"I should hate to do that, you conceited scribbler. But, seriously, do you know any particular bad egg who lives in Hanover Street?"

"Speaking roughly, I should imagine that a good many bad eggs might live in Hanover Street. At the moment I cannot recall any particular specimen, however. But then, don't forget I've been out of London for the past two months. Any special reason for asking?"

"Yes. I wanted to save this mouse-like friend of mine, of whom I'm very fond, from making a fool of herself."

"Get further details and I'll see what I can do," said Delabrae. Then, as the band struck up again, "What about dancing this one?"

"I was wondering when you were going to ask me," drawled his companion, making a face.

As the pair swung on to the floor—one of the best in London—a murmur of voices was heard. Although Jessie Stevens could challenge comparison in looks and dress with any woman at the Rosy Dawn that night, it was her dance partner who drew the attention.

Lord Delabrae occupied a unique position in the life of the Metropolis. He was at once the most liked and the most hated man in London Society. Heir to a great fortune, belonging to a family which could be traced back to the time of the Conqueror, six months before he had yielded to the entreaties of a great newspaper magnate and had entered journalism.

"What I want you to do, Delabrae," this Fleet Street Napoleon had said, "is to write about the people in your set freely and frankly. I want Society to be seen from a new angle—I want them put under a glass and shown as living flesh and blood and not as the overdressed or underdressed puppets they are commonly represented as being. Real live stuff I want from you, Delabrae—stuff with a sting, a wallop, and a punch. You are the only man in London who can do it, and, unless I'm mistaken, you'll make an overwhelming success of it."

Sir Magnus Larrigan had built up a fabulous

fortune by picking the right men. Once again, to use his own phrase, he " turned in a winner." Lord Delabrae's page of gossip in the *Sun* was a triumph from the first issue. Brilliantly written, with an unconventional audacity that left the reader almost breathless at times, this daily story of what went on behind the scenes among London's famous and infamous; celebrities and nonentities; saints (few of these); sinners (many more of these); became the most discussed feature of British journalism. The circulation of the *Sun* increased by tens of thousands a day.

Delabrae became a marked man. He was never malicious—the man had a kindly heart and hadn't a really bad word for anyone—but those whose foibles he portrayed so amusingly in print called him a blackguard, and ignored him in public whenever they were given the chance.

Every time a former acquaintance cut him Delabrae remarked on the fact in his columns, until it seemed that half of London Society must have had their names published in his " Friends Who Have Forsaken Me " list.

Meanwhile, Fleet Street, whose judgment is uncannily sound, and whose good opinion is never lightly gained—a man has to measure top standard before he is accepted by these hard-boiled dwellers in the Street of Ink—took this extraordinary recruit to the profession to their hearts. There

may be faults in newspaper men, but they invariably give credit where it is due. Lord Delabrae was recognised as a brilliant craftsman and was welcomed to their midst accordingly.

This, then, was the man who was Bobby Wingate's friend—a man whom, in her secret heart, Jessie Stevens also admired tremendously. In comparison with Wingate—whom she had never met to her knowledge—her friendship with Delabrae was of very short duration, for her acquaintance with the Society scribbler, as he had been contemptuously called, only dated from six months previously. But she liked Delabrae for many reasons—his humour, his writing talent, his originality, and, not the least, for the man himself.

CHAPTER V AT THE NEXT TABLE

WHILST Delabrae was engaged with a girl, whom his friend would probably have recognised had he taken the trouble to glance below, Wingate occupied himself with his supper. If Delabrae cared to leave a decent meal, that was his own affair. He was hungry himself—the recent

mental effort of opposing two of the best bridge-players in London had given him an appetite. It hadn't seemed to have affected his partner that way. But Delabrae took practically everything in his stride.

It was not until he had nearly finished the meal and was thinking of lighting a cigar preparatory to the arrival of the coffee, that his attention became attracted elsewhere. The next table had been marked "Engaged," he had noticed when he entered, but now the people must have arrived, for he heard voices.

"Now you can tell me, José."

It was a woman's voice—so arresting with its rich, deep vibrancy that, if he had obeyed his first impulse, he would have turned immediately to take a glance at the speaker.

A man's voice answered—somewhat hesitatingly.

"Don't you think I had better wait?" it said. This voice was oily, and from it Bobby was able to picture the man; one of the numerous types of "dagoes" which abounded in London as in every other capital.

"No." Then a laugh—a laugh of contemptuous disregard. "These people are all too intent on their own affairs to bother about anything they may overhear. If you are thinking of that man behind you, forget it—he's eaten a big

meal and probably wants to fall asleep. He will if he's drunk enough."

Even if Wingate had not possessed remarkably good ears he must have been able to catch the remark. Did the woman, whoever she might be, recognise and purposely intend to insult him? That did not seem possible. Her voice was completely strange to him. He was sorely tempted to turn, but after what the woman had said, this was impossible—at least, for the moment.

He had another alternative to stay listening to something which, however shady it might be—and he had little doubt it was shady; the woman's phraseology had given him a fairly good indication of this—was no concern of his, and that was to get up and go in search of Delabrae. In standing up, he would be given the opportunity to look at this woman with the fascinating but somehow sinister voice.

But he did not take this alternative. Something—some force—which he could not understand, compelled him to remain. Perhaps the woman had meant her rude remark to be overheard; she may have intended to compel him by this means to leave the table. If this was correct, she would be disappointed, he determined. If she wanted to exchange shady confidences, let her find another corner.

"The girl—tell me about her." The woman had spoken again and her tone was compelling. "Do you think she will suit? Is she like her photograph? Was she disappointed because I was out?" The questions followed each other rapidly.

"I told her that you were indisposed."

"You never could speak the truth. Why the lie?"

"Because"—this fellow had a damnably sleek, insinuating voice, Bobby decided, now lighting his cigar because the coffee and liqueur had arrived—"I wished to intrigue her. She was of an independent spirit; I saw that immediately. As it was, she would not say whether she would accept the post; she would have to think it over; she had received another offer that day, and so on."

"Was she bluffing?"

There was a pause before the man replied.

"No—I would not say that. She was of the direct, straightforward, true English type. It was only when I said that you would be willing to pay her £300 a year——"

"Fool!" blazed the woman, "to offer her three hundred when she would have been only too glad to have taken a couple of pounds a week."

The man's spirit rose at the rebuke.

"You haven't seen her; this girl is not of the

cheap type. She is a lady. I had to do the best I could. Even now, I do not think she will come. The flat was too shabby ; I noticed how she took things in. I blamed the agents, but I do not believe she was convinced."

" Hanover Street is a good address."

" But we should have taken a more expensive place."

A hand fell on Wingate's shoulder.

" Sorry to have been so long, old boy."

Bobby rose, turned, fell back a pace and sat in the chair which Delabrae had left half an hour before. This manœuvre enabled him to face the woman at the next table.

" It's quite O.K.," he replied perfunctorily. As he spoke, he made a sign with his right hand. Interpreted correctly—as Delabrae was able to do—this read : " Yes, I know I've pinched your seat, but there's a reason for it. Sit down quietly, like a dear good ass, and I'll tell you all about it later."

Dick Delabrae, being gifted with more than average mental agility, played his part perfectly. He not only sank into the chair which Wingate had used, but refrained from speaking.

Through the cloud of cigar smoke which he blew negligently from his lips, Wingate saw a woman whose appearance was as striking as her remarkable voice had enabled him to picture her

to be. Although her age must have been between fifty and sixty—her hair, although still luxuriant in growth, was quite white—she had retained an extraordinary beauty of figure. Her neck and shoulders were flawless, and her face, whilst heavily made-up, might have belonged to a woman of early middle age. It was only her eyes that gave her away. In these, not only her age showed, but much of the life she had lived. Beautiful still, and fascinating—yet subtly but supremely dangerous : that was his reading.

This impression was strengthened by a brief study of the woman's companion. The latter was aged about thirty, as near as Wingate could estimate. He was slim and slick and snakish. His hair, brushed back from a narrow, sloping forehead, looked like a mat of polished black rubber ; he wore a diamond ring on each hand. His clothes fitted him like a glove. Altogether he was quite nasty to anyone who knew his type. To the rest of the world he possibly would have appealed. Many women would have idolised him as a dance partner. The effect he had on Wingate was to make him feel that he would like to push the fellow's face in. He invariably disliked that Spanish-American type.

The conversation languished at the next table. As though conscious that he was studying her, the woman sent one long, steely look in his

direction—and the words which the sleek young man had been about to utter died in his throat. No doubt he had had his foot touched beneath the table.

There was an anxious expression in the woman's face; that much Bobby was able to see before he turned his eyes away. She realised, perhaps, that her audacity in talking so loudly had overreached itself. Perhaps she had had too much wine. Champagne had made her tongue wag too freely.

But something had sobered her; there was a greyish tinge beneath the make-up. Turning in her chair, she signalled a waiter, spoke to him, and then stood up. Her companion was also on his feet. A moment later, they were walking towards the entrance.

"Quick, Dick," said Wingate, directly the pair's backs were turned, "tell me who that woman is."

Without replying Delabrae rose. The woman had been detained by a crush of new-comers. Wingate saw his friend brush past her with a word of apology and disappear. Used as he was to the other's eccentricities, he was fuming when the other returned a couple of minutes later.

"I wanted to make sure, old boy," Delabrae explained, when he had seated himself.

"Sure of what?"

"That the woman you appear to have become interested in is the same person who was pointed out to me in New York as one of the most dangerous woman crooks working at the present time."

"That doesn't surprise me," replied the mollified Wingate. "What's her name?"

"She has several names, according to the detective who gave me the information, but the one she has been using lately is the Comtesse Zamoyski. Keep off the grass, old man—if what I heard is true, she'd skin any man alive and never turn a hair."

"You needn't be afraid for me, Dick—it's a girl I'm thinking about."

"A girl. Who?"

"I don't know."

"Then——?"

"I'll tell you. After you went buzzing off, leaving a perfectly good supper——"

"I'm sorry, Bob, but that particular girl——"

"I know!" retorted Wingate; "they're all wonderful."

"But this one really stands very high in her class."

"Don't they all? Where is she now?"

"She left a friend all alone at her hotel, she told me, and, thinking that her pal would be missing her, cut off. That's the type she is.

But never mind Jessie Stevens for the moment—let's hear this story of yours."

"There isn't very much to tell, but after hearing that that woman is a crook—I wasn't surprised, mind you—I'm pretty certain there's a dirty scheme being worked against some unsuspecting girl." He proceeded to relate the conversation he had overheard.

"So well as I can understand," summed up Delabrae, when Wingate had concluded, "the situation is this: A girl, who evidently does not know the real character of this woman, has called on her some time—probably quite recently—with the object of enquiring about a post which the crook may have advertised—perhaps a companion's job. The girl must have called unexpectedly, for the woman was out. She was received, however, by that gigolo masterpiece, evidently a creature of the Zamoyski, who offered her the job at a salary of £300 a year. Correct, so far?"

"Quite."

"They must want this girl, whoever she is, pretty badly," continued Delabrae. "Whatever their needs, she must be able in their opinion to supply them. I don't take any account of the woman protesting that the man had offered too much money—she was evidently in a dangerous mood to-night, due, no doubt, to drink. Other-

wise, why should a crook who has an international reputation be such a fool as to talk loudly enough for the people at the next table to overhear ? "

His friend nodded.

" That puzzled me, and the only conclusion I could come to was that she was in a nasty mood. She seemed so damned cocksure of herself that she took an elementary risk."

" Crooks often do—the best of 'em. And after all, what risk was there, really ? She didn't know you from Adam, and you didn't know her from Eve. It was only surmise——"

" Intuition."

" Well, intuition, then. I say, it was only intuition that made you imagine these two were discussing something crooked. You had no definite proof. For all you knew to the contrary, that precious pair might have been a perfectly respectable mother and son discussing the engaging of a new housemaid."

" The woman let something out—that she lived in Hanover Street."

" Hanover Street," repeated Delabrae, " why ——" He broke off to add quickly : " Look here, Bobby, this may be a very rummy business after all. You know I was telling you about a girl I danced with here to-night called Jessie Stevens ? Well, when I asked her where her

'attendant cavalier' was, she explained that a girl friend was to have come along, but that this pal, 'a mouse-like kid' was how she described her, had developed nerves and had gone back to the hotel. It was shortly after this that Jessie asked me if I knew any bad egg living in Hanover Street?"

"Good God!" commented Wingate; "suppose——?"

"Wait a minute!" pleaded Delabrae excitedly. "When I enquired why she asked, Jessie said that she was anxious to save this pal of hers—the mouse-kid who had gone back to the hotel—from making a particular fool of herself."

"If this was a novel, the library critics would foam and splutter about the long arm of coincidence," commented Wingate.

"Yes, I know," agreed the leading light of the *Sun*, "but life is a long sight stranger than fiction any day of the week. It would be a dashed peculiar thing if . . ." He broke off quickly. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll ring up Jessie at her hotel."

Then, just as quickly, he groaned.

"Hang it, I forgot to ask her where she was staying!" he lamented.

CHAPTER VI THE TELEPHONE MESSAGE

AFTER posting that letter, Mary went up to her room. She felt very serious. The consciousness came that she had burned her boats. She had committed herself. If the Comtesse Zamoyski was willing to engage her, she would go to the South of France with this woman she had not yet seen. And this in spite of Jessie's warning.

Mary, in the usual way, was splendidly sane. But to every woman there comes a time when reason is overthrown, when the abnormal takes the place of the normal, and it is then that mischief is done.

What had caused the trouble in Mary's case was the attitude taken by Jessie that evening. She felt that her friend had issued a challenge—a challenge which she had to take up in defence of her self-esteem. Jessie had treated her like a child. Those taunts about having no experience of life—they had been intolerable: how she had listened to them without losing her temper she did not know.

Jessie was a dear, of course—but had she expected too much of her? Nearly ten months had passed since she had last seen her, and she was afraid Jessie had changed. She had certainly become more self-assertive, more opinionative. This was hardly to be wondered at,

perhaps, considering the existence Jessie lived. With no one to consider but herself, with the world at her feet, she would have been scarcely human if she had not become spoiled. And spoiled people always wanted their own way. As Jess herself had said, it was the nature of the beast.

This brief reunion, delightful as it had been in some ways, had taught her a lesson. It had showed her that the ways of her old school friend and herself went in very different directions. Even if she could have brought herself to accept Jessie's kindness, she felt she could not have been entirely happy living with her. Jessie had the mental outlook of a girl who had never longed for anything without possessing the means to secure it. Sweet-natured as she was, it was this mentality which had brought the little touch of contempt into her voice.

Jess had pitied her!

The recollection brought a lump into Mary's throat. But it was a lump caused by anger and not by grief. She would never be able to forget the references Jessie had made to the cramped life she had led. No; being continually associated with Jessie wouldn't do at all; they would be quarrelling many times a day.

In any case—and this was the essential point, for in the end everything came back to it—

circumstances now forced her to earn a living. Charity—even such beautifully-gilded charity as Jessie was prepared to offer—was impossible. Thank goodness, she was able to face facts squarely.

She undressed slowly and got into bed. The room lapped her in luxury. Many women, she supposed, would have been willing to forego practically all their principles in order to retain a bedroom of this character. But whilst she appreciated the fragrant and cheerful wood fire, the beautiful bed and hangings, the carpet into which her feet sank as she walked, her independence was infinitely more dear to her than this splendour. And it would be quite easy for her to go back to the meagre comforts at Bloomsbury Square.

The thought of the chill poverty of her room at the boarding-house recalled the flat in Hanover Street. Had everything been all right at that place ? London held many mysteries, she knew—a perusal of the daily newspaper would have told her this, apart altogether from her native intelligence—and that shabby flat might hold one of them. That manicured, sleek-mannered foreigner . . .

Running a comb through her long hair—she had never been bobbed or shingled—she told herself angrily not to be a fool. She was

imagining things. What could possibly happen to her? She supposed there were police in the South of France? And weren't there hundreds of English people in Cannes during the winter season? She had always understood so.

Somehow, she wished her future employer wasn't a foreigner, but that was probably due to her insular prejudice. The fact that she held such rank was conclusive evidence that she was a lady. Her birth must give her breeding. As for the man she had seen, her first impression had certainly not been very favourable, but he was a foreigner and could not help his manner or appearance. As for Jessie's suggestion, it was ridiculous—so ridiculous that she could not feel the horror she otherwise would have experienced.

She was still awake when she heard Jessie enter the room, but because she did not feel inclined to talk any more that night, she pretended to be asleep. And Jessie, after a short look at her, quietly went away.

Jessie was in her usual high spirits at breakfast the next morning. As though she had resolved to wipe the memory from her mind, she made no reference to the topic which had caused the slight tension the previous evening.

"I'm going to place myself in your hands to-day, Mary; you shall do whatever you like.

You only have to say the word. What shall it be ? " she ran on. " Shops, golf——? "

" I'm afraid I don't play golf, Jess. I've only been able to run to tennis."

" Well, my own golf doesn't amount to a row of pins, although I'm frightfully keen. I think as you don't appear to have any definite ideas, that, perhaps you had better come with me to Lalonde's—I'm really due for a fitting at half-past ten. Would you care for that ? "

" I should like it very much." But even as she gave the only possible reply in the circumstances, Mary felt that the decision to which she had come the night before was the only possible one. To try to associate with this rich girl on her beggarly hundred a year was stupid—why, Jessie must spend far more on stockings. . . . If she had a lot more and Jessie a lot less . . . but it was useless to speculate on what could never happen.

Jessie touched her lips daintily with her napkin.

" It's now ten o'clock. We can get to Lalonde's in ten minutes—that gives you twenty minutes in which to titivate, miss."

Mary laughed.

" What titivation I want can all be done in a couple of minutes."

The other girl regarded her intently.

" Don't you ever use any hitchikupoo ? "

"Hitchikupoo?"

"Make-up, you sweet innocent. Rouge, lipstick, powder, what-not."

"I powder my nose occasionally, of course."

"Never anything else?"

"No. And it doesn't look to me as though you needed it, either."

"God bless my soul!" was the comment. "If I never did anything I didn't need to do, I should be sitting in corners half the time twiddling my thumbs. Yes?" she enquired as a page approached.

"Miss Mallory is wanted on the telephone, please."

Jessie leaned forward and spoke in a characteristic burst of impulsiveness.

"It must be that man of yours, Mary—that nice Victoria Station man with the blue collar and the brown eyes! After patient detective work he has discovered where you are staying and is now on the 'phone waiting impatiently to ask if you will lunch with him. Do hurry, my dear!"

For a moment, so convincing was Jessie's manner, Mary became hypnotised into believing that . . . Then she shook her head.

"Nothing so romantic, I am afraid, Jess," she replied.

"But aren't you dying to know if it isn't the brown man? Be off with you, girl!"

Mary, thus adjured, walked into the hall.

"Yes," she said, picking up the receiver, "this is Miss Mallory speaking."

A voice that gave her a strange feeling of excitement spoke from the other end of the line.

"I am the Comtesse Zamoyski. I have just received your letter, Miss Mallory, and after what my nephew, Mr. Santos, has told me about you, I need scarcely say how pleased I am that you have decided to accept the post. May I ask if you could make it convenient to come along to see me this morning?"

"Yes—I think so." Fascinated by that voice which seemed to have so much vitality in it, she momentarily forgot the arrangement to go with Jessie to the dressmaker's.

"Could you come straight away?"

"Yes," she replied, still under that strange spell of unaccountable fascination.

"Then do, my dear: I am longing to see you myself instead of with the eyes of someone else. You know the address?"

"107A, Hanover Street."

"That's right. Just off Hanover Square. Take a taxi—and charge it to your employer—or should it be employess?" A laugh ended the conversation, as though the last few words represented a jest, and then Mary heard the faint plunk as the receiver was replaced.

For a brief while she stood motionless outside the telephone box. Judged by her voice, the Comtesse Zamoyski must be a vital personality. Her voice seemed actually to vibrate and throb with subdued power; it reminded her of a throttled engine, the faint purr of which merely gave an indication of the strength which was waiting to be unleashed. The thought thrilled her and yet made her feel slightly afraid.

Then she roused herself. If she was going to allow any question of fear, or even misgiving, to enter into it now, she would be just the weak, silly creature that Jessie had so frankly stated she was.

That sort of thing wouldn't do at all. Cowardice had never run in the Mallory family, and she wasn't going to be the first to show the white feather.

She beckoned the page.

"Get me a taxi, please."

"Yes, miss." The small, intelligent face switched into a smile. Jimmy Hands had his likes and dislikes among the female guests. Although she was new, he liked this one; she was what he called a "peach."

Back to the dining-room, where Jessie was about to light her first cigarette of the day, Mary hastened.

"Don't tell me anything because it's all written

in your face," Jessie said; "when are you going to meet him?"

"I have to go at once; I've ordered a taxi. . ." Stirred out of her usual calm by several strong emotions, Mary said what was uppermost in her mind. She had not paid any attention to her friend's banter.

Jessie gave a soft whistle.

"Is it possible that this reckless female who rushes off in a taxi-cab at a strange man's bidding is my sedate old school friend, Mary Mallory? Where is the shrinking modesty which used to be such a charming characteristic? Gone, gone—vanished utterly before a look from a pair of deep brown eyes!"

"Jess, you are too silly!" came the comment; "it was the Comtesse Zamoyski who telephoned. She wishes to see me at once and told me to go by taxi. I'm sorry, but I am afraid I shall not be able to come with you to Lalonde's. Do you mind?"

Jessie bit her lip. But her voice when she replied gave no hint of annoyance. Instead, it held a concern which was in striking contrast to her previous frivolity.

"You'll hate me for saying this, I know," she remarked, "but wouldn't you like to take me along with you to see this woman, Mary? I can easily 'phone Lalonde."

It is possible that if Mary had not experienced that momentary wave of misgiving outside the telephone box, she might have agreed to the suggestion. But this very fact made her shake her head.

"She would think I was a simpleton and incapable of conducting my own affairs," she replied, as though answering a challenge.

"And are you, my dear?"

The question, although the tone in which it was uttered was very gentle, made her flush.

"I think so—at least, I am going to make the attempt."

"Then there is nothing more for me to say," rejoined Jessie; "shall we meet for lunch?"

"Perhaps we had better not make any definite arrangements. I don't suppose I shall be staying there long, but I don't want to interfere with your plans."

"I shall come back here for lunch, in any case," was the answer.

"All right, dear—don't think too badly of me." She bent and kissed the other girl on the cheek.

The next moment she had rushed away. She felt she could not stand any further argument.

"My dear, how sweet of you to come at once!"

The speaker rose, with an animal grace that was almost bewildering, from the divan on which she had been reclining, and held out a hand. "Now do sit down and tell me all about yourself. You are artistic, I can see directly, and yet you have a strong strain of common sense. How fortunate to be the possessor of such a rare combination of gifts!"

Mary took the chair which had been indicated, realising that this had been placed so that the light should fall on her face whilst that of her employer remained in comparative shadow. It was rather like going to see a doctor. But she supposed that the woman was within her rights; as her future paymistress, she was entitled to place her under scrutiny.

"I do not think there is a very great deal I can tell you, Comtesse," Mary replied. "I have lived a very uneventful existence until now—being companion to an invalid aunt has not given me much opportunity to see the world."

"And now you would like to take to your wings a little—is that it?" Then, before Mary could reply, the woman hurried on: "I do not see why you should not be entirely happy with me. I have my moods, but if I take to anyone—

as I do not mind admitting I have already taken to you—I can be rather nice."

She waited as though expecting some sort of reply, but Mary, because she did not know what to say, kept silent. This woman, now that she saw her in the flesh, was as intriguing—and baffling—as the voice on the telephone had led her to expect. Almost unnaturally well-preserved except for her face, the Comtesse looked very much a woman of the world—a woman who had taken the orange of life and had sucked it dry. A woman with a history—and consequently a past—undoubtedly. The first glance had told her that.

"Perhaps I had better give you some details about myself," the Comtesse continued after this pause; "you think, no doubt, that my name is a curious one. I myself am an American. My father, who has been dead many years, owned cotton estates in the southern state of Alabama.

"If I may mention the fact, I was considered a great beauty as a girl—heigho! that represents a good many years ago!—and my mother, who was very proud of her only child, took me to New York, Boston and Washington. It was at Washington that I met my late husband. He was a mixture of Pole and Frenchman, his father having descended from a great Polish family.

"We fell in love at once—you would have

understood my emotion had you known the Comte in those far-off days, Miss Mallory—and we were married almost immediately. Twenty years of wonderful happiness was my lot, and then . . ." Her memories appeared to overwhelm this still handsome woman, and she stopped. A lace handkerchief was placed to each eye.

"Silly of me to be so stupid after all these years," she said apologetically, "but real happiness is such a rare experience in this world that when I think of my darling Paul it is as though time stood still. I am back once again in the château at Chantilly. . . . Forgive me, my dear child."

"Of course. I think I can understand—in a slight degree, at least, Comtesse."

"That is sweet of you. And now we must be practical and talk of practical things. Sentiment must be pushed aside for the moment. My nephew tells me you speak French. Let me hear your accent, child."

Mary, feeling like a schoolgirl under examination, spoke a few conventional sentences.

"Not at all bad," was the comment; "you haven't spoken French for some time, though, I expect?"

"No—my aunt, who had been a great traveller on the Continent before she became an invalid, did not like me to practise my French on her

because it reminded her, she said, of the places where she had spent so many happy times, places which she would never see again."

"Poor soul," murmured the Comtesse sympathetically; "have you yourself been to France?—by the way, your name is Mary, I believe. Do you mind if I call you Mary?"

"No—not at all." The request was so unexpected that she had become confused and had murmured the flustered reply of a schoolgirl.

The woman did not appear to notice, however—or, if she did, she was too considerate to give any indication.

"Do you know France well, Mary?" she asked.

"I am afraid I do not; I have only been to Paris."

"You will love the Riviera—it will be an entirely new experience. I should have sailed straight from New York if I had not been forced to come to London on some tiresome business. However, I have finished with the lawyers to-day and my maid is now packing. By the way, I haven't asked you how soon you can be ready, Mary? Could you leave to-morrow?"

"I could. I hadn't thought you would want me quite so quickly but, of course——"

She was not allowed to finish.

"I must leave London immediately," said the Comtesse; "the climate here is absolute poison

to me. Won't you stretch a point and be ready to leave to-morrow ? Is there anything particularly urgent you have to see to ? "

"No." Feeling that it was her duty to concede to the woman's wish, she added: "I will be ready any time you like to-morrow, Comtesse."

The frown which had gathered with somewhat alarming quickness now vanished. The face of the Comtesse became transfigured by a smile.

"That is delightful of you—I feel sure we shall get along splendidly, Mary. Have you many friends in London ? "

"Not many."

"And those you do possess—what is their view of your taking this post ? "

"I have discussed it with only one. She is a girl of wealth who wished me to live with her as a companion."

"The proposition sounds most attractive. Why did you not accept ? "

"Because—well, because I would rather have my independence."

"I quite understand. Working for either relatives or friends is rarely completely successful. Does this rich friend of yours know that you are going to the Riviera ? "

The questions were put in a most charming and

artless manner, but Mary was beginning to get tired of the inquisition.

"Oh, yes," she replied, rising. "If you will excuse me now, I should like to get away; I have several things to see to."

"Of course—but you must give me another five minutes, nevertheless." There was the hint of a determined will behind the conciliatory smile. "We haven't discussed the question of salary yet."

Mary laughed in embarrassment.

"That shows how little used I am to business," she admitted. "Mr. Santos last evening mentioned £300 a year. Considering my inexperience I consider it is too much."

The Comtesse did not reply. Mary became sensitive of the woman's direct gaze. Had she made a mistake?—committed a *faux pas*?

"You are really a most unusual person," said the Comtesse at length; "it is so refreshing to meet such candour that if truth and honesty did not shine out of your eyes, a person who has become as disillusioned as myself might begin to doubt if you were absolutely genuine. No, please do not be offended; I mean it as a compliment. And because I should not think of offering you a smaller salary than the one my nephew mentioned last night, we will agree on the £300 a year. How would you like to receive

it? I pay all my accounts quarterly; that system fits in with my banking arrangements."

"Quarterly will suit me quite well," Mary replied.

"Then everything is now satisfactorily settled. We leave for the South of France by the eleven o'clock boat-train from Victoria to-morrow morning. Can you be there by ten o'clock?"

"Oh, yes."

"Until to-morrow, then." Displaying something of the unusual animal grace she had shown before, the speaker rose from the divan and held out her hand.

"We are going to become very fond of each other, I hope, Mary," she said; "I want you to look upon me more as your friend than your employer. Promise that you will try to regard me in that light."

"If you really wish me to do so."

"Of course, I do. I have taken a great liking to you. Oh, by the way, there is the question of your passport. When were you last abroad?"

"I managed to have a week-end in Paris about fifteen months ago."

"You needn't bother, then. The speaker pressed a bell, and, after a rather long wait, the maid Mary had seen the previous evening appeared.

"Annette will see you out, Miss Mallory. Please do not be late to-morrow morning."

How swiftly changing were this woman's moods! She spoke now as though she were addressing a menial. Mary, although hurt, managed to keep her reply normal.

"I promise to be punctual."

When she was outside the room, the manner of the maid became singular. After glancing to right and left, she approached Mary.

"Are you going abroad with—*her*?" The last word was significantly underlined in a stealthy whisper.

Whatever might be the cause of the maid's extraordinary behaviour, Mary decided that she must be put in her place.

"What is that to do with you?" she said sternly.

The girl looked cautiously round again. Then, her face white and set, she whispered: "It's nothing to do with *me*—I'm leaving here to-day—but if you take my advice——"

"Good morning, Miss Mallory." A man dressed in a well-fitting navy blue suit came out from a door on the left. It was José Santos.

Mary did not reply to the salutation immediately. She was watching the maid. The girl's face had become frozen with a species of fear. The hand that she had placed over her mouth was trembling.

"All right, Annette; I'll see Miss Mallory

out." The maid, dismissed, looked first at the man and then at Mary in a bewildered fashion before hurrying down the hall.

"It's very sad about that girl," Santos remarked; "she was frightened by a burglar in her last situation and her mind has been affected ever since. She imagines that everyone is a criminal—queer, isn't it?"

"She certainly behaved in a most peculiar manner a moment ago," Mary acknowledged.

José Santos put a hand up to his tiny black moustache. In that attitude of cogitation he looked rather absurd.

"May I enquire what she actually said?"

With the lifting of his eyes, the absurdity went, to be replaced by a quality which Mary had not time to classify but which she could only designate as being unpleasant.

Swiftly she made up her mind. She could not get the maid into trouble—and, besides, she did not like this olive-complexioned person any more now than she had done the previous evening.

"She was enquiring into my personal affairs," was the reply she gave; "but I should not like for the girl to be punished in any way."

"She is leaving us to-day," replied Santos; "the Comtesse would have taken her abroad but that she has found the poor creature is unbalanced in the way I have stated. The prospect of being

branded as a criminal even by a half-witted servant is scarcely to be tolerated."

The man's manner was impressive enough, but when Mary was in the street she found herself still thinking of that frozen look of fear on the maid's face.

It was certainly strange—strange, because, although the man's explanation had been plausible enough, she could not find herself wholly believing it.

CHAPTER VIII JOURNEY TO THE SUN

A FULL ten minutes before she had been due to arrive, Mary was waiting on the Continental platform of Victoria Station.

She found plenty to interest, and, indeed, fascinate her. It was the commencement of the busy season in the South of France and the crowd of travellers was impressive. It was a gay, animated and stimulating scene—even to the sight of the men and women, obviously valets and maids, who were standing by huge piles of luggage.

The morning was dull, with a cold wind blowing

shrewdly. But she was able to ignore the weather through the agency of her thoughts, and as she pulled the fur collar of her coat more closely around her neck, she consoled herself with the thought that within twenty-four hours she would be in another climate.

Everything was of absorbing interest—the hurrying porters, the drifting throngs at the huge bookstall buying the latest novels, the constant procession of taxis depositing passengers—and then, finally, the great train that steamed in with an *éclat* that gave her an entirely fresh sensation of excitement.

Only once did she find herself thinking of Jessie. The latter had controlled her feelings admirably when she had heard of the decision that had been so quickly arrived at.

"All right, old dear," had been her comment; "you've made up your mind evidently and there's an end of it. All I ask is that directly you feel you are in any trouble you send me a wire to Brook Street—it will be forwarded wherever I may happen to be—and I will come out at once—by air. Will you promise me that?"

"Of course, Jess." A conscience prick made her add quickly: "And I'll hug you to death directly you arrive."

They had kissed each other a warm good night.

Mary's thoughts returned to the present by

seeing the Comtesse getting out of an expensive-looking Daimler car. The " too, too " man was at the door, his head inclined like a flunkey.

She hurried forward.

" You are here in time, Miss Mallory—that is good."

As she stood by her employer's side, Mary was conscious of the attention the woman was receiving. Wearing an impressive red fox tie and a smartly-tailored suit, the Comtesse was an impressive figure, and Mary felt almost proud to be associated with such a person.

" You have brought your luggage, of course ? "

Mary indicated the small trunk and suit-case over which a porter stood guard.

" José," said the Comtesse, " see to the things." With a wave of her hand, she moved off towards the bookstall, and Mary was left alone with the nephew.

During the next few minutes she was initiated into some of the routine of foreign travel. She watched three huge wardrobe-trunks being labelled with the magic word " Riviera "—black letters on a white ground—saw all their luggage being weighed, and then transported into the huge van of the monster train.

" It is an unpleasant morning, Miss Mallory, but soon we shall be out of it and into happiness."

It was a curious phrase, but this man seemed

to be in the habit of making odd remarks. Mary dismissed it as being due to either his foreign origin or to his imperfect knowledge of the English language.

At last the train gathered way, and was off. The first-class carriage to which the porter had taken them was full. Mary was placed next to the Comtesse, who had a corner seat.

For the first ten minutes this might have been an ordinary journey, but then came evidence of the change she had made in her status.

"Miss Mallory, please pass me down my case."

Mary felt herself flushing, not so much at the command (she knew she would have to become used to obeying requests like that), but at the tone which had been used.

She replied evenly, however.

"Certainly, Comtesse."

The other three persons in the carriage looked at the woman with the apparent casual indifference which masks curiosity by well-bred English people.

Mary rose, reached for the small leather case which had been placed on the rack behind the Comtesse, and handed it to her employer.

"Thank you."

Mary flushed a second time. Although she was now a servant—yes, she supposed that was

the right word—yet her employer's nephew had remained seated throughout this episode.

Santos had made no effort to get the case. This attitude was in striking contrast to the excessive politeness he had hitherto extended to her, but of the two attitudes she thought that she preferred his present lack of manners.

The Comtesse, having taken out a box of cigarettes, handed back the case to be replaced on the rack.

This time, a man seated opposite the lounging Santos, who was deep in a French novel which he had begun to read directly he had got into the carriage, sprang up.

"Permit me, please," he said.

Mary thanked him with a smile, but declined the offer.

"Oh, but please don't bother," she replied.

The man still hesitated.

"Well, if you can manage——"

"I can manage quite well, thank you."

The man reseated himself, after glaring at the indifferent Santos.

The whole incident had taken only a minute, but that brief space of time had demonstrated to Mary a very real truth—the vital difference between being one's own mistress and having to be at the call of someone else.

But this woman must not be allowed to think

that she owned her body and soul. If this manner persisted, she would show her resentment. Of that she was determined.

The train raced on through the fair fields of Kent, now looking sluggish and unkempt beneath the grey, frowning sky—and into the Unknown.

By the time Calais was reached, Mary found her temper sorely tried. It had not taken her this long to realise that the Comtesse was a woman of moods, and that her previous flowery protestations of friendship and affection were as little to be relied upon as the over-mannered politeness of her nephew.

The burden of the journey had fallen on her—the least experienced of the three travellers. It was she who had been deputed to see the luggage through the Customs and to interview porters and train officials. No doubt, this sort of thing fell to the lot of a companion, but with a man present, it did not seem right to her. It was something entirely foreign to her previous experience.

There was one consolation, however. Upon getting into the P.L.M. Express at Calais, she had heard that Santos would be getting off the train at Paris. Mary breathed more freely when she heard the news. The Comtesse by herself was a sufficient problem.

The woman appeared helpless. Either she was preposterously lazy, or resolved to show this new companion that she must be prepared to earn every penny of her salary.

When Paris was reached after the usual four hours' journey, Santos made a surprisingly quick departure. Some time before the train had stopped, he had bidden the Comtesse what appeared to Mary to be a perfunctory farewell, had merely nodded to his aunt's companion, and had then hurriedly left the compartment. Mary felt she would be pleased if she never saw the man again, but this aspiration was shattered by the Comtesse informing her that José would be joining them in Cannes probably within a couple of days.

Feeling tired and dispirited, she saw the white-jacketed steward come rushing through the corridor, ringing a bell whose tiny tinkle was drowned by his stentorian voice shouting: "Premier Service."

At last the Comtesse showed some signs of self-animation.

"Dinner!" she exclaimed. "Thank Heaven there is some break to this eternal monotony! Come along, or we shall be lost in the crush. You made the reservations at Calais, I hope?"

"Oh, yes," replied Mary humbly. She was feeling crushed.

But after that hectic journey through the

crowded corridors during which, owing to the violently swaying train, she sustained several nasty bumps, she felt herself regaining her normal poise.

The scene in that French dining-car. . . . How interesting it was! First of all, the varied types. The chief were readily recognisable—the English, looking as imperturbable as no doubt they would if mysteriously transported to a deserted island in the South Seas; the French, silent for once, because of their intense concentration on the food (if you don't eat quickly in a French dining-car, you don't eat at all); and then, in a class all to themselves, the Americans. There were at least four separate parties of these settling down to eat when Mary and the Comtesse took their places at the table for four to which the waiter conducted them.

Mary rapidly summed them up under three headings: (1) charming—this applied to only one party—a man with a most interesting and cultured face, whose companion was a very elegantly-dressed woman; (2) nondescript—this covered two other groups; (3) impossible. This was the only fitting description of the largest group—a young man and wife, an elderly nurse and two utterly detestable boys.

The behaviour of these children was so appalling that the attention of everyone in the dining-ca

was drawn to their table. Yet not one of the three elders attempted to rebuke them.

The food in a French dining-car is irrevocably fixed—one always knows beforehand that one will be given a meal consisting of soup, fish, meat with two vegetables, cheese and fruit. Occasionally, instead of fish, one is given an omelette. Coffee, if required, is charged extra ! But, although the routine is the same, the food is invariably good.

Yet it evidently did not meet with the satisfaction of these two detestable children, for, whenever the waiter approached with a course, they would wave their grimy hands and say "na-aw." The result was that they went without food—much to Mary's secret satisfaction.

The behaviour of their elders was little better, for between each course they produced chewing gum from somewhere, and worked their jaws far more industriously than when eating their meal.

" I see you have noticed that appalling group," commented the Comtesse to Mary. " It is one of the saddest reflections on American parenthood that the behaviour of their children, when travelling abroad, is so outrageous. There is little excuse, for those people are obviously wealthy. But the truth is that American children are so hopelessly spoilt that by the time they reach any age of intelligence, they have got

completely out of hand. One notices it everywhere with a certain class."

After murmuring some conventional retort, Mary divided her attention between the meal and the other people in the dining-car. The food was giving her back strength of mind, and the Comtesse was also yielding to its beneficent influence. She was becoming human again. But for all that, Mary decided that she was going to stand up to this woman in the future, if her employer attempted any uncalled for high-handedness.

In the meantime, she was determined to enjoy herself. For that was the principal reason why she had undertaken this adventure. She remembered that with each turn of the express' wheels, she was being taken to that sunshiny land which she expected to find an earthly paradise.

The meal over, the hazardous return journey to the Comtesse's *wagon-lit* was successfully undertaken. After smoking a cigarette, her employer then announced her intention of going to bed.

"These journeys always make me so dreadfully tired," she explained; "perhaps you will give me a hand, Mary."

It was whilst she was so employed that there came a knock on the door.

"See who it is," ordered the Comtesse.

Going to the door, Mary opened it and found two men outside. One, by his uniform, she recognised as the *contrôleur*, whilst the other was in ordinary dress.

The *contrôleur* answered her unspoken query.

"It is necessary for me to examine mademoiselle's tickets," he stated.

"Oh, yes, certainly," she replied in French; "I will get them." The tickets were in her hand-bag, which she had left in the compartment.

There seemed to be some set purpose in the visit, however, for directly she turned her back, the two men entered the *wagon-lit.*

The Comtesse, who had got into a *peignoir*, sprang to her feet angrily, and demanded what they wanted. It was left to Mary to explain.

"They wish to see the tickets, Comtesse," she said.

This did not satisfy her enraged employer.

"Return to the corridor immediately," she cried.

The *contrôleur* bowed.

"A thousand pardons, madame," he said; but Mary noticed that there was a covert smile on his lips.

He turned to his companion and murmured something beneath his breath.

[illegible]t.

Mary went out into the corridor, handed over the tickets, watched them being examined, and then received them back. She returned to the *wagon-lit* to find the Comtesse still shaking with temper.

"I will get that man dismissed," she said. "The outrage of it! This is not the time to examine tickets. It is not done again until we reach Marseilles. There must have been some object."

What the object was apparently gave the speaker some concern, for, until the time that she retired for the night, she remained silent.

The last thought that Mary had as she herself placed her head on the pillow, was: what was behind the secret smile of the *contrôleur*?

And who was his companion in plain clothes?

CHAPTER IX THE HOUSE OF DARKNESS

THE phrase flashed into Mary's mind directly she saw the Villa Graciosa. Totally unlike her conception of houses on the Riviera, this square-shaped building, set down in the midst of a gloomy and desolate courtyard, looked more like

a prison than a place of residence. Tired and dispirited after her long journey—twenty-six hours had passed since she had taken her seat in the boat-train at Victoria—she could have cried but for the self-control which she forced to her help.

"I hope the servants have arrived," said the Comtesse irritably; "see if you can't ring a little louder."

Mary took the knob of the antique bell and pulled it with all her strength. The next moment she had stumbled backwards, for the mechanism had come away in her hand. This touch of ludicrous mishap was the final straw.

Muttering an imprecation, the Comtesse Zamoyski delivered a series of blows on the heavy door with the handle of her umbrella. As these met with no response, the woman began to lose all control. She behaved as though rage had driven her mad. A stream of words, the real meaning of which Mary was ignorant, poured from her lips.

"The fools aren't here!" the woman exclaimed at last—and then, as though to give her cause for a fresh outburst, the door opened cautiously and a man, wearing a green baize apron, peered out.

"Are you Armand?" snapped the Comtesse.

"*Oui, madame.*"

"Then why the devil have you kept me waiting all this time?"

The man began to explain in rapid French. He and his wife had only come an hour or so before. There had been so much to do that they had forgotten Madame la Comtesse was due to arrive at four o'clock. Moreover, they had both been at the back of the house.

"Well, hurry up now, you fool, and let me in." The Comtesse was still in a furious rage.

The man opened the door wider and, following her temper-ridden employer, Mary stepped over the threshold. Behind her she heard the taxi-driver the Comtesse had engaged at Cannes Station protesting volubly at the amount of luggage he had to unload. But she dismissed this incident in the presence of more important events.

Inside, the Villa Graciosa was scarcely more reassuring than outside. A series of large, lofty rooms, furnished sparsely, struck Mary as being dismal and cold as she walked through them by the side of the Comtesse. There was a mustiness in the air, and the general atmosphere was not merely inhospitable but forbidding. So much for her dreams of the palatial home, bathed all day in the fierce rays of the Mediterranean sun!

"The fools should have got here hours ago—they had their instructions," declared the Comtesse; "then the heating would have been seen to and fires lit in the bedrooms. However, it's no use losing one's temper."

Had she been in a more reposeful state of mind, Mary must have smiled at the remark. The Comtesse had been in a state bordering on frenzy for the last ten minutes.

"Go and see if you can find that man's wife." The Comtesse gave the order in a manner so off-hand that it amounted almost to an offence. "She will probably be in the kitchen quarters."

Mary walked away in the direction indicated. She had obeyed immediately, first because she would not allow the woman to see how hurt she was, and, secondly, because she was glad to be able to be alone for a brief space. The rage which had possessed the Comtesse had been rather terrifying. It seemed so insensate.

After traversing a long, winding passage, she came upon a huge, stone-flagged kitchen. Here she saw a bent-backed old woman talking rapidly to a girl with a cold, insolent face, who was dressed for the street.

At the sound of her entry, both stopped talking, staring at her with unblinking eyes.

"Madame, the Comtesse has arrived," Mary said in French, addressing the woman, "and she wishes to see you."

"Yes, mademoiselle." The woman ducked her head in a queer kind of obeisance and began to untie the apron round her ample waist.

The girl with the sneering face removed her hat and coat.

"I have been engaged as personal maid to the Comtesse," she announced; "perhaps I had better see her as well. Are you a friend of the Comtesse, mademoiselle?" she enquired in a hard, clear voice.

"I am companion to the Comtesse," Mary replied. Her sense of bewilderment was increasing, but another fact out of the general fog emerged clearly enough: she didn't like this girl whose clear-cut insolence was a direct challenge.

"I had no instructions concerning you," Mary went on before turning away.

The girl's beautiful mouth—she was really strikingly good-looking, Mary noticed—twisted itself into a smile.

"Don't you worry about me—I shall be able to look after myself," she said enigmatically.

With the door locked behind her, Mary took off her shoes and flung herself on the narrow bed. Although she had been sent upstairs ostensibly to unpack, she was going to have a few minutes' absolute peace.

This was the first free moment she had had since arriving at the villa two hours before. These two hours had not constituted a very pleasant introduction to her life at the villa. To

begin with, she had been told to help the old French couple in doing menial work. It was not that she considered herself above such duties; what rankled was the manner in which the Comtesse had given the order. And all the time that insolent-faced maid had looked at her with a smile on her cold, curved lips. . . . Whether she had done anything during the long train journey to give her employer offence she did not know—she certainly was not able to think of any fault consciously committed—but the Comtesse had not waited very long before showing once again that she had claws, and sharp ones at that.

She supposed she could not complain. Her earlier resentment had been foolish, perhaps; common sense should have convinced her that, in order to earn a salary of six pounds a week, a companion to a temperamental woman like the Comtesse Zamoyski would be forced to put up with a considerable number of pin-pricks. She would have to get used to them; that was all. As time went on, no doubt her pride would become accustomed to the petty assaults made upon it.

But life was not going to be any too pleasant, if the past two hours could be the basis of any forecast. Still, she told herself, she would be the worst kind of coward if she allowed these early experiences to discourage her. After all, she was

actually in the Riviera, the enchanted land, according to the advertisements, and there *must* be some pleasurable times in store for her.

With the determination to be as optimistic as was possible, Mary began to unpack. But even with this new resolution, she was unable to become enraptured with her bedroom. It was small—although she would not have minded this—and very meagrely furnished. Indeed, so poor were the appointments that she could only conclude it must have been used by a maid in the previous occupier's time. Moreover, it was tucked obscurely away at the top of the villa in a lonely position at the end of a long, dismal corridor. Certainly, the Comtesse might have allotted her a better room.

But the lonely position had this advantage: whenever she was able to retire to her room, she would be right away by herself. There would be little fear of her being disturbed. There was an agreeable side to this knowledge: she already felt that there might be many occasions in the future when she would be thankful of this solitude.

After changing into a simple dinner-frock which she had bought three months before at a little shop in Church Street, Kensington, she went downstairs. The evening meal, she had been told, would be at seven-thirty: it was now ten minutes to the half-hour.

As she passed a door on the first floor, she caught the drift of voices. Surely it was the insolent-faced maid speaking.

"She is too proud and haughty, that one."

The reply was unmistakably in the Comtesse's voice: "Never mind—she was the best I could get, and she will do very nicely, you'll see, Nadja."

Mary quivered with indignation. Was it she who was being discussed? It seemed inconceivable that the Comtesse and a girl, presumably a complete stranger, engaged like the old French couple through some agency, could have become so intimate in such a short time—almost as incredible as that a woman in her employer's position would exchange confidences with a maid.

Here was a further bewilderment, and her first impulse was to knock on the half-open door and make her presence known. Then, deciding that she would raise the point with the Comtesse some time during the evening, she passed on.

In a room that would have been charming had the furniture and the decorations been in better repair, she saw the Frenchwoman engaged in preparing the table.

"Madame will be coming?" enquired the crone.

"She will be down in a few minutes," Mary contented herself with replying.

"Dinner is almost ready." With a curious clucking sound the woman left the room.

Mary sat down by the wood fire which had recently been lit. Once again she was glad to be alone—her nerves were none too steady. She did not allow herself to dwell on the fact, but she remembered that she was a thousand miles away from anyone she could count on as a friend, in a house which possessed a distinctly disturbing atmosphere, and among people who saw fit to discuss her when they imagined she couldn't hear. The words of the maid: "She is too proud and haughty, that one," had undoubtedly referred to herself. There was no one else in the house to whom it could apply—unless the Comtesse was having a guest to dinner. Even then . . . no, it was altogether bewildering.

She rose as the Comtesse entered, and was rewarded with a smile. The woman had switched to a gracious mood.

"We dine *à deux* to-night, Mary; I hope you don't mind? I could have invited some friends, of course, but I thought we would both go early to bed. That terrible journey! Yet it was better to get it over and done with. Now we are here, whereas if we had studied our comfort, we should have been merely at Avignon. It has been rather trying for you. Everything is very strange, of course."

"Yes," was the agreement, "things are rather strange." She wondered if the Comtesse would take up the point.

"Never mind. You go to bed early to-night and have a good sleep. To-morrow you will have the blue sea at your feet, the lovely sky overhead, you will feel the sun on your face, and you will think you did a very wise thing in leaving that miserable England of yours. And then, my nephew, who, as I have told you, was detained on business in Paris, may be expected, and we shall begin to be ever so happy together."

The crone bringing in the soup put an end to the conversation.

The food, although simple, was excellent of its kind and most wonderfully cooked. As she ate, Mary felt her confidence returning.

"What is the name of the girl you have engaged as your maid, Comtesse?" she asked.

"Nadja. She is half-Russian, and has had a most romantic history. She was maid to a Russian princess who fled to the Riviera during the revolution and has recently died. I was lucky to get her."

"Did you engage her through the same agency as the French couple?"

"Of course," said the Comtesse; "how else, seeing that I had never set eyes on the girl before,

could I have obtained her ? " The woman's eyes were suspicious.

" I merely wondered. You see, I haven't travelled before, and it seems rather remarkable to arrive at a house like this and to find a staff already installed."

" You'll get used to minor miracles like that in time," replied the Comtesse. The speaker smiled as she sipped a glass of Burgundy.

She was doubtless smiling at her innocence, Mary reflected. But the innocence which had amused the woman was deceptive. Mary had accomplished her purpose.

She knew now that the Comtesse had deliberately lied.

Why ?

CHAPTER X THE LADY OF PEARLS

TIRED out as she was, Mary found she could not sleep. She had refused wine at dinner, in spite of the raillery of the Comtesse, her reason being that she wished to keep a clear head ; but she wished now that she had taken at least one glass ; it might have helped her to get off. It might also

have deadened the thoughts that were pressing on her brain.

One question kept repeating itself. Why had the Comtesse lied ? There had been no need, so far as she could see. If the Comtesse had known the maid previously, why could she not have said so ? Unless, of course, there existed a previous association which she wished to keep secret. In that case the deception was easily understood.

Lying, to Mary, was one of the most contemptible of all sins. There was something so sickening about a deliberately told lie. It denoted a treacherous, dishonest mind—a crafty, unscrupulous nature. Nothing disgusted her so thoroughly as finding anyone out in a falsehood.

Discovering this particular specimen of untruth made her recast completely her former opinion of her employer. Up till now, the worst estimate she had formed of the Comtesse was that she was eccentric, occasionally overbearing, and the possessor of a somewhat alarming temper. But these faults were at the worst merely distinguishing features of a vigorous character. One did not expect a woman of the Comtesse's virile personality to be an embodiment of all the virtues.

But—a *liar !*

Mary told herself that if the woman could bring herself to tell one deliberate untruth she would lie at other times. In fact——

It was at that moment that a staggering question came to her: Was the woman's whole life a lie?

It might well be. That elaborate story of her marriage with a Polish-French Count—it was possibly a sheer invention!

Once the idea that her employer might be a fraud had gained ground in her mind, Mary was able to collect a good deal of evidence to support the theory. She could not help thinking that a woman occupying the position her employer had given her to understand she did, would have lived in a different place from that shabby and somehow furtive flat in Hanover Street. Then, when she went abroad, surely a woman of rank and wealth would decide on a better dwelling than this gloomy and ill-appointed Villa Graciosa? As she turned in a vain endeavour to court sleep, Mary remembered the strange behaviour of the maid in London. What had really been behind that singular question: "Are you going abroad with—*her*?" What was the reason of the "her" being so stressed?

But if the Comtesse really was an adventuress, why had she engaged a companion of her type? There seemed no reason for it. She could hardly expect a girl of her class to give any assistance in nefarious undertakings.

The whole problem was so baffling that her

head ached with the strain. She decided to try to banish the whole subject from her mind. And, presently, she found herself drifting into gracious sleep.

In the meantime, a curious conversation was taking place in the room which the Comtesse Zamoyski had decided upon for her boudoir. It was here that she had wished Mary an affectionate good night.

The Comtesse had a companion. It was the girl whose name she had told Mary was Nadja—the maid who had been companion to a Russian princess on the Riviera before that former celebrity had died. Could Mary have seen the girl now she would have been even more surprised, for the maid was attired in expensive evening dress, and spoke to the Comtesse in terms of equality.

"I think you have made a mistake in bringing that girl here." Nadja puffed furiously at her cigarette as she uttered the criticism.

The older woman laughed.

"I have thought this thing out very carefully and you must leave me to be the best judge," she replied; "Mallory looks exactly what she is—a well-bred, refined girl of the English upper middle class, reduced by circumstances to the necessity of earning her living. She is just the type to appeal to the Wentworth woman."

The other shrugged her shapely and lavishly-displayed shoulders.

"Have it your own way," she retorted; "and now what about looking in at the Casino? You don't propose to stick here all night, I hope? By the way, whatever made you select this graveyard?"

The Comtesse Zamoyski made a quick reply.

"It was cheap," she said; "the cheapest villa in Cannes of any size. And, being in Super-Cannes, it's a good address."

"Yes—until you get inside," was the scathing comment. "When is José arriving?"

"To-morrow, I expect. Unless he cleans up something good in Paris—and he wasn't at all hopeful—we shall have to get really busy, my child." A sinister laugh followed the words.

"With the Wentworth woman?"

"She seems the best prospect—and now let's get off."

The speaker rose with that bewildering physical grace which had so attracted Mary Mallory's attention. Her companion looked at her critically.

"You've still a damned fine figure, Diane," she said; "there's many a man—especially youngsters—who'd fall for you."

The woman who called herself the Comtesse Zamoyski reached for her cloak.

"You flatter me, my dear—my *amours* are things of the past. Besides, men are so . . . but, still, should the Wentworth business fizzle, who knows? The fact is, I'm damned poor and must have money. Ring for a car, *ma chérie*."

It took fifteen minutes for a car to reach the Villa Graciosa from the nearest garage, and during that time the younger woman fumed at the delay.

"This is a God-forsaken hole," she declared, stamping her foot; "give me a suite at the *Carlton*."

"We may all have a suite at the *Carlton* if things go well," returned the Comtesse, who, surprisingly enough, was by far the more philosophical and patient of the two. But she had wined well at dinner—a fact which had not escaped Mary Mallory's notice—and this made a difference.

Twenty minutes later they were being bowed into the front entrance of the Casino. The season was approaching its height—in another fortnight it would be at the zenith—and a constant succession of cars drew up before the imposing entrance.

To the official who came hurrying, the Comtesse said in her most haughty manner: "We wish to become members of the Baccarat Club for a month."

The official bent himself almost double.

"*Certainement, madame.* It is a pleasure to serve madame. This way, madame."

He led them through the crowded main hall of the Casino, where a theatrical performance in French had just concluded, and up to a bald-headed, benevolent-looking gentleman behind what might have been a counter. The B.H.B.G., looking as though he might be guarding the portals of the Heavenly Hereafter instead of one of the greatest gambling *salons* in the world, peered at them paternally through gold-rimmed spectacles.

After examining their passports, he enquired where they were staying, and then, after giving a receipt for a month's membership of the Baccarat Club, smiled them his earthly blessing.

"Madame la Comtesse and you, mademoiselle —I wish you both good fortune."

"A thousand thanks, monsieur," replied the Comtesse.

Armed with the essential ticket, without which it is impossible to enter the Baccarat Room, they approached the two *physionomistes* who stand by the large revolving door. It is the duty of these men—perhaps the shrewdest readers of character living to-day—to prevent any undesirables from entering the gilded gambling chamber where fortunes are won and lost every night.

The man with the black moustache, lined face, and hard, glittering eyes exchanged a look with his colleague as the Comtesse and her companion drew near.

"Herriot has passed them—so I suppose we must," he whispered, "but all the same, give the word to Julian."

The man who had just uttered the instruction extended to the two women his most welcoming smile. The examination he gave to the tickets extended for his inspection was of the most perfunctory description, and the gesture with which he manipulated the revolving door for them to pass through might have been reserved for princesses of the blood.

All this ceremony did not deceive the Comtesse.

"Did you notice his whisper to Karl? He recognised us. That man is the very devil."

"And supposing he is," retorted the younger woman, "what does it mater? We got by old Bald-head. We've as much right in here now as the Duke of Westminster."

"Yes—but it means that we shall have to watch our step all the same. Oh, the same old crowd. . . . Let's stroll round for a bit and see who's here."

The scene which presented itself, whilst familiar enough to the two new-comers, was sufficiently striking to have arrested the attention of anyone

paying a first visit. The huge room was brilliantly lit, but not well ventilated. The air, blue with cigarette and cigar smoke, was charged with the thousand-and-one perfumes of women. It stung the nostrils and seemed too heavy to breathe, so that at first, coming fresh from the outside, one choked with it.

Play was taking place at numerous tables, over which were signs denoting what stakes were wagered at each. Most of these were full. At the far end, near the enormous bay window which forms such a landmark from the outside, there was a special table roped off from the others.

"The Syndicate haven't started yet," commented the Comtesse; "isn't it there that the Wentworth woman always plays?"

"Yes; she has been winning heavily for a fortnight—you won't be disappointed. It's early yet."

"Oh, I can wait."

A party of passing men all stared at the speaker. She was conscious of their scrutiny, but ignored it. This woman, twenty years before, had had the world of men at her feet. The homage of males was very familiar to her. Once she had revelled in it, now it somehow sickened her. Her mentality had changed, she could not tell why Now, instead of the worship of men, she wanted power over women. She hated any woman who

was better off than herself ; hence it was amongst the wealthy women of the world that she prowled. And no creature of the jungle could be more ruthless, more daring or more cunning.

As her younger companion in crime had said, she was still a remarkably fine figure. She walked through that splendidly spacious room, which gave her such a matchless stage, with a grace of movement that drew every eye not intent on the fall of the cards.

Although she knew that to at least some in the room she was a marked woman, she felt happy and contented. For this was one of the places which she had made her hunting-ground.

Suddenly the girl walking by her side touched her arm.

" Here she is ! " she whispered.

A woman of sixty had just entered the room. She had a thin, hawk-like, aristocratic face.

Round her neck was a rope of pearls so magnificent that the Comtesse Zamoyski held her breath.

" The Wentworth," said the girl next to her.

MARY woke feeling warm and happy. She wondered at this until she saw that the sun was pouring into the room in a golden flood.

At first she could scarcely credit the phenomenon: sunshine at seven o'clock of a January morning! Then she remembered that she had left the chills of London far behind and was about to begin her first day on the Riviera.

The knowledge was exciting—so exciting, indeed, that the doubts and embarrassments of the night before were temporarily banished. Slipping on a dressing-gown, she stood for a few minutes by the window and then went along to the bathroom which she had been told by the Comtesse the night before she could use exclusively. She hummed a tune as she strolled down the passage, feeling it was good to be alive.

The bath required cleansing before she could get into it, and the water was only tepid, but she did not allow either annoyance to take the delight off the morning, and after a vigorous rub-down with a rough towel, she walked back to dress.

The bedroom had been transformed; warmed by that wonderful Mediterranean sun, it had changed from a mean apartment into a bower of delight. Flinging up the window, Mary breathed

the flower-scented air and looked upon a world that was a sheer delight.

The sun had risen over a chain of snow-capped mountains—she must ask the Comtesse what these were called at breakfast—and was shedding its radiance upon a town which seemed to be holding up mythical arms in welcome. Villas of all shapes and sizes glittered in the morning air. Some, she noticed, were painted blue, others a pinkish shade; yet others were green, whilst there were some deep-brown ones. In the far distance—she strained forward at this almost unbelievable wonder—was one actually orange-coloured. The sun lit it up like a huge ball of flame. She gasped at the sight.

A glance at her watch made her hurry. It was twenty minutes to eight. She had to report in the Comtesse's room at eight o'clock. What her duties would consist of she scarcely knew—with her Aunt Margaret, she had read the morning paper, answered her letters, seen to the serving of the breakfast. But Aunt Margaret had been an invalid, whilst the Comtesse was a woman obviously in vigorous health, despite those heavy shadows beneath the eyes which no cosmetics, however skilfully employed, appeared to be able to obliterate. With the thought of meeting her employer within a few minutes, something of the glory of the morning vanished.

It was as though the sun had disappeared behind a cloud, leaving a cold misgiving behind.

However, she was stupid to be so fanciful; much of the doubt of the night before had been due to nerves, she decided, as she took a last look in the spotty mirror over the poor dressing-table.

She found her employer in bed, wearing a filmy wisp of a night-dress.

The Comtesse bestowed a smile upon her in greeting.

"Good morning, Mary. You are on time, I see. I'm so pleased you observe punctuality. And now, if you will give me that wrap, I'll ring for breakfast."

Mary fetched the wrap, which was of *broché crêpe de Chine* with an ostrich feather collar, and helped the woman on with it.

"You must get used to me in the mornings, my dear—all my life I have suffered from terrible headaches. These come on directly I wake, and make me look ghastly. They pass off by the time I get up—but they have left their mark, as you can see. However, as I say, you will get used to it in time. I shouldn't have mentioned it only I imagined you appeared frightened just now."

"Oh, no; I wasn't frightened, Comtesse; may I ring for you?"

"If you will," indicating the bell. "Now, tell me, what do you think of your first morning on the Riviera?"

Glad of the change in the subject, Mary replied quickly.

"It's just as wonderful as I had imagined," she said enthusiastically; "aren't the villas fascinating—the gorgeous colours they are painted, I mean?"

"Yes—it is very different from what you have been accustomed to in England. But here colour plays a definite part in life. People try to give Nature a helping hand; how well they succeed you will be able to tell for yourself before very long. Warmth and joy in existence are the two principal features of the Riviera."

The French crone, entering with a breakfast tray which seemed to Mary very sparsely laden until she remembered that she was not in England, put a stop for the time being to a talk that Mary was finding very interesting.

"I hope you're not too hungry, Mary," laughed her employer; "we are in France now, you know, and we must follow the custom of the country. Coffee and rolls merely, but I expect you will agree that both are good."

When she came to sit down, after seeing to the Comtesse's wants, Mary found the prophecy was justified. The coffee was quite the nicest she

ever remembered drinking, whilst the crisp rolls and butter were delicious.

It was a meal to which she was destined to look back many times in the future. From her seat near the window, outside of which was a stone balcony, she could see in the distance the unbelievably blue sea. The sun flashed on a rugged coast-line that seemed made wholly of red mountains. The combination was enrapturing.

"You might improve your French by reading extracts from the local paper, *La Saison de Cannes*," the Comtesse said, pointing to a journal with a picturesque cover which the French servant had brought in with the *petit déjeuner*.

It was an interesting paper, Mary discovered—snobbish, and containing a good deal of prattle about the Great and the near-Great, but it was stimulating to read about the arrival of famous people at the local hotels. After half an hour of this, the Comtesse announced that she intended getting up.

"I am going to see a dressmaker in the town this morning, Mary," she said, "and whilst I am with him you can have a look round on your own. I think perhaps you would like that. The Croisette, which is the name given to the sea promenade, ought to interest you. Everyone who is anybody makes a point of showing themselves on the Croisette in the hour before luncheon.

It was half-past ten before a start was made. The Comtesse announced that she had several letters to see to, but when Mary, thinking it came within her range of duties to write these, made the offer, it was not accepted.

The refusal was couched in such a way, however, that she could not feel offended.

"I mustn't work you too hard at the beginning, my dear," said her employer; "to-day shall be your holiday. The grounds of this villa are not what I should like them to be, but there is a seat under that palm tree which will give you a good view of the harbour. The chief reason why I took this old-fashioned place was because of its unique position."

Seated in the sunshine, watching the funicular railway which served as communication between this highly-elevated district of Super-Cannes and the town itself, Mary thought herself well content. Once again her misgivings had passed —vanished like some uneasy dream, memory of which persisted only at intervals. After reading and thinking so much about Cannes, it was still very difficult to realise she was actually in this town of luxury and gilded pleasure.

On the principle that nothing really lives up to its advertisements, she prepared herself for a possible disappointment. This came after a wonderful drive in the hired motor-car down to

the town. Cannes itself, apart from the luxury shops, she found was mean and—yes, dirty. The main street of the town, the Rue d'Antibes, was narrow, badly-paved and appallingly noisy. Trams, which looked as though they belonged to a prehistoric age, hurtled along, mingling their discordant shrieks with the nerve-racking warnings of the horns of the French taxis, and the deeper notes of the 'buses. The journey to the *couturier's* through this densely-crowded thoroughfare was the nearest approach to bedlam she had yet encountered.

The Comtesse made no comment upon the din, and Mary, not caring to display what she imagined would be thought her ignorance, also kept silent. Outside a shop which showed in its small, narrow window, a single gown draped with careless artistry over a chair, the car stopped.

"I shall be in here at least an hour," stated the Comtesse; "would you care to be driven or would you prefer to walk about doing your sightseeing?"

"Oh, I'd much rather walk, thank you."

"Very well, then. Notice the name and number of the shop—Manty, 125 Rue d'Antibes. The Croisette is through there," pointing to a street which led away to the left; "be back here punctually in an hour. It is now eleven o'clock."

Mary felt quite a thrill as she turned away. To

be alone for a whole hour ! The sense of freedom was delightful.

A walk of a hundred yards or so brought her to a wide, open space. Straight in front was a huge, square-shaped building which something told her must be the Casino. Standing outside a charabanc-booking agency, she looked across at the monster and tried to visualise the scenes which were enacted inside.

" Would you like a nice ride to-day to the Gorges du Loup ? "

She turned to see an official of the touring agency pointing invitingly to a charabanc which was already nearly full of passengers.

" No—not to-day, thank you," she smiled back, wondering if she would get the chance to make any such trips whilst she was in Cannes. " Would you mind telling me in which direction is the Croisette ? "

To mention to a native of Cannes the sacred name of the famous promenade is to gain instant attention.

" The Croisette," replied the man reverently, " is there, mademoiselle—to your left. You are a stranger to Cannes, yes ? Then you will find the Croisette most fascinating. *Bon jour*, mademoiselle."

Crossing the wide *place*—an undertaking demanding care because of the busy traffic—Mary

started to walk down the promenade which is known all over the world. Like the town, it belied its reputation. It was very dusty, and littered with scraps of newspaper. The sand below on the right was extremely uninviting. Only the sea was beautiful—beautiful because of its colour, but for no other reason. It was tideless, lapping placidly against the sand, instead of coming into the shore in a succession of inspiriting waves.

But humanity more than made amends for the shortcomings of Nature, Mary decided. Although it was before the fashionable promenading hour the pavement was thronged. Men and women of many nationalities, all obviously wealthy, sauntered past, observed and observing.

In her plain tailor-made coat and skirt, she felt far removed from these gorgeous beings, the majority of whom were so exotic that they appeared inhabitants of a separate world. They were entirely different. Take the Spaniard—she felt sure he was a Spaniard—who had just passed, for instance. Surely a man who wore a black sombrero hat and a plum-coloured cloak, fastened at the neck with a big silver chain, could not take part in the prosaic transaction of ordinary existence ?

Ah ! She had it : he must be a film actor ! She had read somewhere that there was a big producing studio at Nice.

That seemed the only explanation for the existence of three-quarters of these people: they were participants in a super-film which, when produced, would stagger the world with its magnificence. . . . This woman, looking like a Russian princess of the old *régime*, who approached, leading a Borzoi hound on a leash—could Gloria Swanson herself have made a more alluringly-picturesque leading lady?

It was awfully stimulating, rubbing shoulders with the exotic ones of the earth in this way, and she imagined how Jessie would enjoy it if she had been there. But Jessie, used to such scenes, might have been inclined to belittle and to criticise.

She could imagine Jess scoffing: "Russian princess? Don't be an utter fool, my dear! More likely she's the daughter of a Chicago pork king. And she's only hired that dog at so much an hour. . . ."

No, Jess would have shattered the illusion. There must be a disadvantage in being so worldly-wise; the gilt was always being rubbed off the gingerbread.

By the time she had passed the last of three enormous hotels, Mary thought she had better turn back. It was twenty-five minutes past eleven. The sight of people sitting under orange-awnings outside the *Metropole Hotel* made her risk

crossing the road. She had noticed the names of famous Paris dressmakers over shops on the other side and, although the prices would put any purchases out of the question, womanlike she wanted to have a look at the windows.

She had just turned from gazing with proper awe at a diamond ring in a jeweller's, marked 90,000 francs, when a man passing raised his hat, and, after smiling, stopped.

She acknowledged the greeting because, although she could not "place" the man immediately, yet she was able vaguely to recognise him.

Then, in a flash, she remembered.

It was the Victoria Station man.

CHAPTER XII THE WARNING

WHAT should she do? Should she herself stop? This would be only doing the right thing, after all, considering the service the man had done her a couple of days before.

The problem was solved quickly by a voice which said: "I hope you don't mind my stopping?"

She turned.

"Not at all. In fact, I'm very pleased. In this sea of faces it's quite nice to see one that is familiar."

"How jolly to be remembered! Are you in a hurry?" he enquired.

Mary glanced at her wrist-watch.

"I have an appointment on the Rue d'Antibes at twelve o'clock."

"That leaves exactly twenty-five minutes. Heaps of time for a coffee. Will you leave the place to me?"

"Of course."

She smiled as she gave her assent. Although it had been so wonderful in a way, yet, at the same time, there was nothing really remarkable about seeing this man again. The feeling had been merely that of meeting an old friend—a friend she respected and in whom she had confidence. She could not explain to herself this impression; she only knew it existed.

"I'm going to take you to the Galeries Fleuries," announced her companion; "it's only one minute from the Rue d'Antibes."

They turned back along the Croisette and entered a square facing the sea front. In the centre were flower-beds and wide lawns used as putting greens. To right and left were further luxury shops. Straight in front was the imposing

entrance to a huge hotel. The whole place was picturesque and impressive to the eye.

Outside a café a small string orchestra was playing. Sitting under coloured umbrellas, groups of immaculately-dressed men and women were talking animatedly.

It was a gaily-entrancing scene, and Mary sank into her chair with a little sigh of gratitude. What a pity she had so little time to spare. But she determined to enjoy herself while she could.

After he had given the waiter the order, the man leaned towards her.

"I think perhaps I had better introduce myself," he said. He took a card from a small morocco case and laid it on the table.

Mary read:

Robert Wingate,
224, *Pall Mall, S.W.*1.

"My name is Mary Mallory," she supplied.

"Thank you," responded Wingate, "and now having got to know each other, I should like to say how perfectly wonderful it is meeting you here this morning!"

"It does seem rather extraordinary. How far are we from—Victoria Station?"

"Something over a thousand miles as the Blue Train flies, I believe. Did you come over with your friend?"

"No. I came"—she found herself hesitating —"with someone else."

Wingate frowned over his cigarette. He badly wanted to ask this girl a whole heap of things about herself, but he did not dare. He had noticed the change in her expression when he had put the last question—a look of something like dismay had come into her face—and it behoved him to be careful. He didn't want to antagonise her interest before he had really started out to gain her confidence. It was the most astonishing luck, running across her again like this, but he must take care not to queer himself.

He decided to put purely safe and conventional questions.

"Been here before?" he asked.

"I'm almost ashamed to confess I haven't. But isn't it beautiful?—parts of it, I mean," she hastily corrected.

"Yes—parts of it," he agreed. "Other parts are rather rotten. The trouble is," he added, "that wherever one finds people who represent a lot of money—and I suppose at the present time there is more wealth represented at Cannes than in any other purely pleasure town in the world—quite a lot of undesirables gather—crooks and riches generally run in pairs, you know."

Mary looked round at the well-dressed crowd.

"Yes," her companion said, interpreting her

glance; "there are probably quite a sprinkling of them here."

She laughed.

"They certainly are well disguised," she replied; "none of them look like criminals."

"The really high-class criminal never does look the part," he told her; "that is one reason why he is so successful. If he carried his trade in his face, everyone would suspect him."

"Are there women criminals here, too?"

"Quite a lot. As this is your first visit to the Riviera, Miss Mallory, will you think it impertinent if I offer you a little advice?"

"Of course not." What she had scorned when coming from Jessie Stevens, she remembered, she took pleasure in accepting from this man. And yet he was practically a complete stranger.

"Be very careful of the friendships you make whilst you are here. But no doubt the friends you are with have already told you that."

"Oh—yes."

She flushed as she hastily murmured the corroboration. A feeling of almost painful embarrassment swept through her. She would have liked to have told him the truth about her coming to Cannes, but a sense of pride restrained her. Frank with herself now as always (she hated any form of hypocrisy), she knew that she wanted to keep this man's friendship. But what would

be his attitude if he learned that she was merely a companion to a woman who had taken one of the shabbiest villas in the town—a woman, moreover, whose conduct did not put her entirely above suspicion of being classed as one of the undesirables to whom he had himself made reference ?

" I'm afraid you'll soon get tired of all this," her companion remarked.

" Oh, but I love it now," she replied.

" The last thing I should like to do would be to cause you any disillusion," he replied. " But, honestly, this Riviera business is largely a fake, you know."

" A fake ? "

" Yes—I'll tell you why : The French Riviera is largely built up on publicity. The fashion is started by the local Press, which is subsidised. Then, it seems to be good policy on the part of the London newspapers to print all that is agreeable about this part of the world, and little that is disagreeable. Added to that is the fact that the middle classes, who are probably the most snobbish section of society, are anxious to come here in order to say that they have actually seen the Duke of This, and the Duchess of That. Follow me so far ? "

Mary nodded.

" I think so."

"The Riviera is nothing better than a cosmopolitan variety show," continued the man who was going back on his word not to make her disillusioned. "It has many Press agents, and from now on until the end of April, when the official season is supposed to close, armies of Press photographers, journalists, and publicity merchants of all kinds will record each detail of the performance for the benefit of those unfortunate stay-at-homes who feel they would give their ears to be here.

"A great deal is printed about the so-called romance of the French Riviera—but very little of it is true. Human interest, certainly, is here in great variety, because the very rich and the very notorious commingle and share the extravagant limelight."

"How scathing!" declared his audience.

"Really I don't mean to be. But I feel that I don't want you to have any false ideas about this place. You ought to know, for instance, that the ultra-smart, contrary to popular belief, form only a very small percentage of the people who make up the population of the Côte d'Azur. Apart from the millionaires, the courtesans, the crooks, and the gamblers, the main bulk of the winter residents here are *emigrés* and *hivernants* —people who leave England in order to escape paying taxes, and are able to make a better

show financially than they would in their own country. Not much romance about that, is there ? "

" Not much," she confessed. " But nothing of this kind is printed."

Wingate laughed.

" Of course not, my child ! If it were published, the great bubble would be pricked—the illusion would be dispelled. I suppose it is pretty rotten of me to put such an idea into your head, but,"—his voice became more serious—" I repeat: I don't want you to run away with the notion that this place is a sort of earthly paradise. It's very much the reverse, as a matter of fact. Just about now, it is probably the most dangerous spot on the face of the earth for anyone innocent of its real character."

She stole a look at him.

" In that case," she replied jestingly, " I am glad I have at least one friend." The words, although lightly uttered, had a serious undertone, and Wingate turned impulsively.

" I want you to mean that," he said ; " seriously I want you to mean that."

" But I do mean it," she replied. " I am sorry I interrupted, however. Please carry on with your devastating revelations. Tell me some more about these tax-evaders."

" Well, there is not a great deal to tell. If

you are here long enough, you are bound to meet a good proportion of them. You will find them practically all the same. They are glorified idlers for the main part; they spend their days playing tennis and golf, and their nights gossiping and swearing at each other across bridge tables. Very few of them ever go into the Casino. For one thing, they hate to lose their money, and for another, it is not considered specially good form. That sort of thing is left to the people who come merely for the gambling."

"But where do these people live?" she asked. "All the villas I have seen so far have been huge affairs."

"They live in a long chain of jerry-built places lining the coast, and in these have endeavoured to establish an atmosphere of England before the War. This atmosphere, to anyone not belonging to their set, is so stifling that they are able to keep very much to themselves.

"Perhaps the most curious feature of the whole amazing business is that the major proportion of these winter residents on the Riviera are ex-Army and Naval men. They talk largely of their patriotism, but never fail to abuse the country they have left. England, gone hopelessly to the dogs, is a favourite topic."

Again Mary put in a word.

"I am afraid you are a cynic," she commented.

"Nothing of the sort," was his defence: "I am not being cynical at the present time, for instance. Far from it. I feel that life holds a very great deal. I am lucky to be here—I would rather be here than any other place. Doesn't that satisfy you?"

"I should be rather difficult to please if it didn't," she compromised.

It was very pleasant sitting there, accepted by this man as an equal, but she was afraid before long she would betray herself."

"I'm extremely sorry," she said, looking at her watch, "but I really must go."

Wingate rose instantly.

"I am going to be brutally direct," he said. "I should very much like to see you again—may I?"

She matched his frankness.

"I should very much like to meet *you* again—but I am afraid it will be rather difficult for me to make any appointment. You see," as disappointment showed in his face, "my time is not my own."

"Might I telephone you?"

Mary smiled.

"You could—if I remembered the number. We only arrived yesterday afternoon——"

"Like myself."

"Were you on the Blue Train?"

"No—I flew from Paris."

"How exciting!"

"You might try it going back. There is a regular service now. But if you tell me where you are staying, the telephone number can easily be found."

"We—my friend and I—are staying at the Villa Graciosa in Super-Cannes."

"What a terribly long way away," he commented.

"It was not my choice. My friend"—he noticed she hesitated over the word—"the woman I am staying with, made all the arrangements."

"Well, it's not an insurmountable distance. I'll telephone if I may. I should like to show you the town. There is a good deal to see in Cannes—far more than at Monte Carlo. We could dine at Les Ambassadeurs—the restaurant attached to the Casino, you know—and dance. Would you care for that?"

"I should love it," she replied with frank enthusiasm, "but, remember, please, that my time is not my own."

"I won't allow this woman—whoever she is—to monopolise you," he said jestingly. "And now please let me see you as far as the Rue d'Antibes."

"If you don't mind, I'll run along by myself." She held out her hand. "Good-bye."

He shook his head.

"I refuse to say 'good-bye'; it's merely '*au revoir*'!"

The girl smiled.

"*Au revoir*, then. And now I must fly."

"You have three minutes. Please let me show you the way." He guided her across the Square and into a pleasant street. "The Rue d'Antibes is at the top. I shall 'phone you to-morrow," he added.

"Do." She smiled in parting and was soon lost to view amid the swirling crowd hurrying from the Croisette.

For a few moments after she had gone, Wingate continued moodily to smoke. Then, his mind made up, he walked rapidly in the direction of the Rue d'Antibes.

Was he losing his head over this girl? His common-sense told him not to be an ass. But he was entirely serious about one thing. He was determined to see that Mary Mallory did not get into any trouble whilst she was in Cannes. That would mean two women being on his hands——he had left for the Riviera at a moment's notice because Mercia, his very charming cousin, had been anxious about her mother, Lady Wentworth.

"Bobby, *do* cut along down to Cannes and see that mother does not make too big a fool of herself this season—you know what she is.

She seems to be beating her own records this year; although she has been in the place only a fortnight, the newspapers are full of her ridiculous carryings-on."

This may have been an undutiful manner of expressing the speaker's anxiety, but Wingate had inwardly agreed that the language was more or less justified. His aunt, Lady Isobel Wentworth, came from a race of gamblers—and when she arrived on the Riviera, she more than maintained the family traditions. Although wealthy, she "plunged" at such a rate that impoverishment might be expected at any period during a season's play.

"You can have a good time on your own, Bobby, and yet keep an eye on mother," his cousin continued to plead.

"What about going yourself?" he had asked.

"Can't possibly—not yet at any rate. I'm bridesmaid at six different weddings, there is the Westminster Hospital ball to arrange—didn't you know that I was one of the hon. secretaries?—and, oh, a thousand and one other things are on just now."

"All far more important, I suppose, than saving the only mother you possess from pledging the family pearls?" he scoffed.

His cousin gripped his arm.

"It's the pearls that are worrying me, Bobby," she said seriously. "What do you think mother's done?—she's taken the real ones to Cannes instead of the imitation set."

Her companion had whistled.

"Good Lord!" he replied, "are you sure?" This was grave news; the Wentworth pearls were justly famous. They not only represented a great sum of money, but were a family heirloom.

"Positive. Barnby, the family lawyer, is furious. Bobby, suppose a gang of crooks were determined to get those pearls? You *must* go!"

"You don't seem to care about any private arrangements I may have myself."

With the charming inconsequence of her sex, Mercia had waved the suggestion aside.

"What possible private affairs can you have of any importance, Bobby?" she had replied; "if it's a new girl, you'll be able to forget her easily enough once you get to Cannes. . . Now, don't be stupidly obstinate—you know how I hate argument of any kind—just give me a nice, innocuous, non-inflammable, cousinly kiss and say: 'Of course, Mercia angel, I'll go!'"

"All I can say is: God help the poor bloke you marry!" Wingate had retorted. But he had promised—as he had known from the beginning he would.

Once having made up his mind, he had done the trip as quickly as possible—in two flips, to be exact: Croydon to Le Bourget, Paris to Cannes. Nothing was so tedious to him as a train journey, even when undertaken in a P.L.M. express.

He was glad now that he had come. His aunt at dinner the previous evening had been very difficult—"Do you imagine, you poor simpleton, that I am going to allow myself to be treated like a child?"—but the miracle of seeing that girl again! What a compensation. . . .

There was something he did not understand, however; her manner had been peculiar. She seemed to be worried; had appeared confused. He had asked her only ordinary conventional questions, but she had not wanted to answer them—that had been obvious. And then she had hesitated over the word "friend." He didn't like that. A girl had no reason to be ashamed of people who were above-board.

By this time he had reached the Rue d'Antibes through the Rue des Etats Unis. It was impossible to walk except at a snail's pace on account of the crowd.

But, amid that sea of faces, he saw only two. One was that of the girl from whom he had recently parted. Mary Mallory was getting into a car drawn up outside a dressmaker's.

She had as companion a remarkably well-

preserved, elderly woman—the woman who had sat at the table behind him at the Rosy Dawn night club three evenings before—the woman Dick Delabrae had said was a famous crook.

CHAPTER XIII THE MERCURIAL MR. SANTOS

"AND now tell me what you did with yourself." Gently pressing the arm of the girl by her side, the Comtesse Zamoyski put the question with an air of kindly interest. There was more than thought for the girl in the remark, however; the woman who was down in the police records of several countries, including America, as "Diane Vanderfelt," had quick eyes: she had noticed the well-dressed man on the pavement staring with amazement at Mary Mallory as she stepped into the car.

So much pleasure had Mary derived from the unexpected meeting with "her Victoria Station man" that temporarily she forgot any suspicions and replied as naturally as if the question had been put by an old friend—Jessie Stevens, for instance.

"Well, to begin with, I had a walk along the

Croisette, going the sea side and returning the other."

"Aren't the shops wonderful?"

"Yes—wonderful. It seemed too much of a temptation even to look at them."

"Why?"

"Because I shall never be able to afford buying anything in them."

The Comtesse made an unexpected comment to this.

"Who knows?" she said; "perhaps you will. I wouldn't entirely give up hope, my dear."

Mary shook her head incredulously.

"People like Chenil, Lelong, and Molyneux do not exist for me. I intend to try to get a dress or two whilst I am here, but it won't be from a shop in the Croisette."

"And what did you think of the people you saw?" asked her companion, changing the subject.

"The impression I had was that they were all ready and made-up to take part in some amazing super-film."

The Comtesse nodded, looking at the girl shrewdly.

"Not at all a bad description, Mary," she said; "you have an observant eye. Were there many English people in the crowd?"

"Oh, yes, quite a number."

"You didn't recognise anyone, I suppose?"

Before she realised it, so artlessly was the question put, Mary had fallen into the skilfully-prepared snare.

"Oh, but I did," she said, excitement flushing her cheeks; "I saw a man I met—I mean a man I knew in London."

"Which, to be very trite, only shows how small the world really is." The Comtesse, whilst making the conventional remark, was busy with her thoughts. The man, no doubt, on the pavement. But why had he stared in such a bewildered manner? Then, in a flash, came remembrance: she was able to recall the man herself—he had been sitting at the adjoining table at the Rosy Dawn the last night but one she had been in London.

"Was your friend surprised to find you here?"

"Yes—rather."

"You hadn't told him you were coming?"

"No. I don't know him very well."

"But he would like to know you a great deal better—is that it, Mary?"

The girl coloured, partly with embarrassment and partly with indignation. The remark, she considered, was in bad taste.

"He offered in merely a friendly way to show me some of the sights. But, of course, I said that my time was not my own. I did half

promise, however, to go to the Tennis Club with him to-morrow morning if you did not want me."

"Of course you can go, my dear," was the ready reply. "And I must arrange something for your distraction myself. The tennis will be delightful. I don't expect you to be tied to my apron strings," she added, with a smile.

Her swift response to kindness made Mary's anger vanish.

"I cannot take any holiday before I feel I have earned it," she said.

"You must allow me to be the best judge of that, child."

During the remainder of the drive to the villa, the Comtesse asked no further questions, but occupied the time in calling attention to the various places of note on the route. The villas belonging to many famous English people were pointed out to the keenly-interested girl.

"Although Cannes, in common with the rest of the French Riviera, has been invaded since the war by that hopeless race, the poor but proud English middle-class petty snob—you know, the retired Army and Navy person who, instead of doing their duty by their country, come abroad in order to avoid paying rates and taxes"—here Mary smiled because she might have been listening to Wingate—"yet it still attracts the very best type—the aristocrats.

That is why you see so many magnificent villas—that salmon-coloured one we have just passed, for instance, is the property of Lord Derby, who named it the Villa Sansovina, after one of his famous race-horses."

In this mood, her employer was so interesting as to hold her complete attention, and Mary listened in absorbed attention.

Just before they reached the shabby gates of the Villa Graciosa, something tempted her to ask a question.

"With all the wealth that is here—surely Cannes must be one of the richest towns in the world at the present time—isn't there any danger from thieves and other criminals?"

Watching the Comtesse closely, she was able to notice the woman's face harden.

"Criminals," she replied with a short, unpleasant laugh, "there are criminals everywhere, I daresay—if you read the newspapers, you will be able to discover that for yourself—but I have never heard that they are more numerous here than anywhere else. Who has been putting such ideas into your head?"

"In every story about the Riviera I have read," said Mary, with a lightness of tone that was cleverly assumed, "a desperate criminal has always been a leading character." She did not add that only that morning she had received

a warning from a man who obviously knew what he was talking about.

"You mustn't be influenced by sensational novelists, my dear. In any case, if you have any fears on that subject, I may tell you that the police here are very efficient. You do not see much of them, but they are everywhere, working secretly. I pity the criminal, however clever he may be, who tries to hoodwink them. The French prisons are extremely nasty places. But here we are at home. I feel sure you are ready for your lunch."

"I am, indeed."

The excitement of the morning had given her an appetite.

The Comtesse went straight to her room. Here she found Nadja waiting.

"There's a telegram," announced the supposed maid; "perhaps it's from José."

"Yes," replied the older woman, after ripping open the envelope, "it's from José. He will be here shortly after lunch. There is nothing doing in Paris, he says."

"And what did you do with Miss High and Mighty this morning?" enquired Nadja, lighting a cigarette.

"I gave her leave to walk about—and she met a man—someone who may be useful to us, perhaps."

"Who is he?"

"I know nothing beyond the fact that he is someone she met in London and looks as if he had money. Curiously enough, I was able to recognise him as a man who was sitting at the next table at the Rosy Dawn the last night but one I was in London."

"Well, it's money we want. This English doll may be useful, after all."

"She will be useful enough, do not be afraid. Do you think I promised to pay her six pounds a week for doing nothing?" The speaker caught her companion's eye and they both laughed as though at some secret jest.

"Let her begin straight away. Tell her to cultivate her rich man friend. We could arrange a little gamble here, no doubt."

"No doubt," agreed the Comtesse and smiled again. "I am sorry things are rather slow at present, but they will improve."

"They will have to," was the uncompromising answer.

Lunch at the Villa Graciosa that day was a pleasant meal. The Comtesse seemed exerting herself to be specially agreeable, and the morning's adventure induced Mary not only to live in the present but to look on the bright side. Time enough for her to cross the bridges when she came to them, she told herself again.

"I have some news for you, my dear," her employer announced when the dessert stage had been reached; "my nephew will be here almost immediately. He concluded his business in Paris yesterday and caught the Riviera express. He will prevent us from becoming dull."

Mary could not help smiling. She was contrasting this mincing mannikin of a man with Bobby Wingate. Then, to cover up what might have appeared to be rudeness, she said quickly: "I'm sure I shall not be dull here, Comtesse: everything is so attractively different from what I have been used to."

The words gave the woman an opening.

"I am delighted to believe that you may be contented. After all, it was a certain responsibility to bring you so far away from London and all your friends. I have been thinking: if you would like to invite the friend you met this morning to lunch or dinner one evening, I shall be most pleased to entertain him."

"That's very kind of you, Comtesse." She hesitated before saying anything more. The sharp glance the woman had given her roused once again that indefinite mistrust which every now and then reared its ugly head to dissipate her happiness. "But I do not know if he will be able to accept; I believe he knows a great many people in Cannes and will probably be invited out a great deal."

"Very likely—this is a most hospitable place." The tone intimated that the speaker had lost her previous interest, and the meal finished in silence.

Shortly before three o'clock José Santos arrived. He looked travel-stained and ill-tempered, but his face brightened when he saw Mary.

"It has been worth the journey from Paris to be able to see you at the other end, Miss Mallory," he said, bowing with exaggerated grace; "I trust my aunt, the Comtesse, has seen to your comfort? As I had the privilege of engaging you, I consider myself responsible for your happiness whilst you are with us."

She conquered her instinctive dislike of the man and smiled as she said: "Thank you, Mr. Santos, I am very comfortable indeed." Which, if not strictly accurate, was certainly a safe reply to make.

"And now, if you will kindly excuse me, I must go to make myself presentable. Oh, that journey from Paris. . . ."

The Comtesse, coming into the room at that moment, stretched out both arms, and her nephew ran towards her. The two embraced affectionately. After all, Mary decided with some sense of satisfaction, there was a distinctly human side to her employer. Her love for this mincing nephew of hers seemed genuine enough.

One might have imagined that she would have held this mere parody of a man in contempt, but she appeared not merely to be fond of Santos but to respect him. It was surprising.

"Take a chair into the grounds and rest until tea, Mary," said the Comtesse; "my nephew and I have so much to talk about—his trip to Paris was a business one on my account—that I shall be engaged all the afternoon. To-night we may have some mild excitement for you; José will probably require to celebrate his return."

"Yes, indeed, *ma tante*," echoed Santos, "and now I must make myself fit to entertain two such beautiful ladies!" He ran off laughing. A mercurial creature, Mary reflected, as she took the deck-chair and walked through the hall; he had changed from utter lugubriousness into the highest of good spirits, all within a few minutes.

As she settled down with an English magazine, she wondered what the Comtesse had meant by the half-promise of giving her some excitement that evening.

She also wondered when she was to be allowed to begin earning her salary.

FOR at least three minutes Wingate stood stock-still, staring after the car. He had never experienced such a shock. Unless he was mistaken in that woman's face—and he did not think this was possible—the girl whom he had thought so fresh and virginal, so healthily frank, was the associate of a crook! No wonder she had hesitated over the word "friend"!

What was he to do? As he turned and walked down the Rue des Etats Unis on his way to the *Majestic*, where he was staying, he did not see that he could do anything. That the girl was aware of the real character of her companion was shown by the dexterous manner in which she had refused to bring her into the conversation that morning.

But wait a minute—he was condemning her unjustly. What was it Dick Delabrae had said at the Rosy Dawn on Tuesday night? Damn it, he wished he could remember.

During the ten minutes it took him to reach his hotel, Wingate puzzled his brain over the problem. He realised quite frankly that a great deal of his future peace of mind, if not actual happiness, depended on Mary Mallory coming through the present suspicious circumstances unscathed. If she really proved a wrong 'un,

then he'd never believe in a woman again so long as he lived.

Arriving at the *Majestic*, he took a seat at one of the tables and ordered a cocktail. Drinking this, he pulled out a pencil and a piece of paper and, whilst drawing haphazard designs, concentrated afresh on his task.

Bit by bit came remembrance. To begin with, Delabrae had rushed off to dance with a girl (whom he himself had not seen). Whilst Dick was away, he had overheard a conversation between this woman (whom he had encountered just now with Mary) and a yellow-faced dago. They were discussing a girl. Now what in the hell was it the woman had said? Something about whether this girl would be suitable or not. . . .

And what was it the dago had replied? Something about being of an independent spirit —beyond that his mind would not register; the memory had gone. After all, there had been no particular reason at the time why he should have endeavoured to imprint this conversation on his brain. He had mistrusted the woman, whose appearance had rather intrigued him, but she had meant nothing to him beyond that.

Then Delabrae had returned. He had asked Dick who the woman was, and had been told she was a crook. Dick had said something else

—damn, why couldn't he remember? But since that motoring smash back in the summer, his memory had been most unreliable. He was able to recall parts of events and conversations—and then everything else appertaining to the subject would vanish, leaving him feeling a fool. He could remember faces all right—in fact, he still had a particularly good memory for faces—but bits of talk were often confoundedly elusive. Until people got to know of this weakness, he had been in no end of rows on this account. It usually ran like this: "But, Bobby, old thing, I *told* you . . ." And he could only shake his head like the hopeless ass he was.

Could the girl this woman crook had been discussing at the Rosy Dawn have been Mary Mallory? It hurt him to think it—hurt him like fury.

Staring straight in front of him, he saw nothing but the face of a girl. Her eyes of lightish blue were clear and frank. They might have been the eyes of a schoolgirl. Could a girl with eyes like that be a criminal—or even the associate of a criminal?

Damn it, he couldn't, wouldn't believe it. It was sheer insanity even to suspect such a girl. Although he had known her only half an hour, did all the knowledge he had gained about women go for nothing? Was it completely valueless?

Either Mary Mallory was absolutely what he took her to be—a girl of the English upper middle classes—or she was the finest actress the world had ever seen.

It was a very bad quarter of an hour through which Wingate passed. The thought that this girl, who had appealed to him so instantly that he seriously imagined he must have fallen in love with her at sight, was *wrong*, revolted him. His mind sickened at the thought.

Should he get at the truth. That would be comparatively easy. In his pocket he had a letter written by Dick Delabrae—who in the world didn't Dicky know?—to a Frenchman who held some sort of position in the French Secret Service, and who was hanging out at Cannes on a bit of a holiday. A word to this chap Joubert—who would be able to pull all sorts of wires, of course—and everything concerning this rotten mystery would be made clear.

But did he want it to be made clear?

Supposing the worst was correct? Supposing his fear that this girl was a crook could be proved? The thought was so hateful that he refused to allow his mind to dwell on it. And he would postpone his visit to M. Joubert. The latter might already know too much.

In any case, he decided, it would be foolish to become too precipitate. The girl had promised

to see him again—the next morning, if possible —and he would be better able at a second meeting to form his own conclusions. Even assuming—fight this thought as he might, it still persisted—that Mary Mallory had already marked him down as a prospective victim, he would be on his guard. How damnably ironic the warning he had given her only an hour before now seemed!

After luncheon—which his thoughts made an unpleasant meal—he decided on a walk. The Croisette, after that morning meeting, annoyed him, and he turned inland. After a stiff climb, he found himself, by accident outside the *Chester* —the modest, middle-class hotel which his aunt favoured with her presence, mainly, as she herself was the first to admit, because the reasonableness of its prices gave her more money with which to gamble! The management of the *Chester* was honoured, the other guests preened themselves on being allowed to talk to such a celebrity as the famous Lady Wentworth, and so everyone was satisfied.

Bobby did not feel in a particularly gracious mood—he certainly was not prepared to engage in a further encounter with his formidable relative just then—but, as he passed the gates of the hotel, he heard his name called. Looking up, he saw Lady Wentworth taking her ease

beneath the combined shades of an enormous sun umbrella and a huge palm tree.

"Bobby," she called, "come here—I want to talk to you."

Groaning inwardly, Wingate took the seat which his aunt patted with a gloved hand.

"I do hope you are not going to wear that condemnatory expression every time we meet," remarked Lady Wentworth; "otherwise I would suggest that the sooner you run along to Monte Carlo the better."

Her nephew frowned as he took out his cigarette-case. Why the deuce did everything persist in going wrong? What had he done to deserve it? But he was determined to put this unruly old woman in her place.

"To be equally frank, my dear aunt, you give me a pain—that is the exact reason I am forced to wear the formidable visage to which you object."

Lady Wentworth laughed. She laughed, moreover, as one who enjoyed the turn the conversation was taking. Her remarks were often frank to the point of brutality, and she never objected to receiving a Roland for her Oliver.

"I suppose you have the pearls in mind again? I wish you would think of a more intelligent subject for conversation."

Wingate threw away with an angry gesture the match he had just lit.

"My dear old thing," he exploded, "if you *will* persist in playing the giddy ass, you must expect to have the bitter truth brought home to you. As I told you last night, I came out here at the express wish of Mercia——"

"Who is a fool," was the crisp interjection.

"I repeat, I came out to Cannes at considerable inconvenience to myself——"

"Stick to the truth," commented his aunt briskly.

"At considerable inconvenience to myself," repeated Wingate grimly, "for the direct purpose of endeavouring to prevent you making an utter ass of yourself."

"My dear young idiot," answered his aunt with perfect good humour, "don't be so completely Y.M.C.A. ! I'm very fond of you, Bobby, but you strain my affection terribly hard when you talk like a Labour Cabinet Minister admonishing the heathen ! "

"Do be serious, old thing," adjured her listener ; "you know very well I'm in the right. Why on earth did you bring the real pearls out here when you could have basked in the limelight just as well with the imitations ? "

"For two reasons," was the brisk response ; "in the first place, I strongly dislike wearing

imitation pearls—it always gives me such a cheap feeling—and secondly, I knew I could get a substantial loan on them from that Egyptian pawnbroker who haunts the Cannes Baccarat Room."

"You'd pawn the Wentworth pearls?" cried Bobby in real horror.

His aunt remained unmoved.

"They're mine to pawn, aren't they?" she asked. "What is the sense in having something of value if you can't raise money on it when the necessity arises?"

"All right—have it your own way. But you seem to forget that there's something worse than pawning the things—you can have them stolen."

"Now you're getting melodramatic. Stolen! Who is to steal them, pray?"

Bobby fought his temper.

"A great many people. You won't deny, I suppose, that Cannes is full of crooks at the present time?"

"One always hears similar nonsensical stories."

"And the sensible person pays attention to them. My God, you simply don't realise the risk you are running—your pearls are world-famous; a desperate crook would think nothing of murdering you on the chance of stealing them."

Lady Wentworth rose with a grace she had

inherited from a long line of distinguished ancestresses.

"You have spoilt my afternoon," she said severely; "if you have any regard for my feelings, you will leave Cannes immediately."

She turned her back on him and began to walk towards the hotel.

Smothering an oath, Bobby hurried after her.

"Promise me to put them in a bank," he pleaded.

His aunt's face became storm-ridden.

"Robert, you are a fool; leave me!" she ordered sternly.

CHAPTER XV A MORNING'S TENNIS

ONCE having received the necessary permission, Mary eagerly accepted the chance to see Wingate again. Besides, the prospect of getting some tennis—her favourite sport—was irresistible.

Directly lunch was finished, she telephoned the *Majestic*, leaving a message.

For obvious reasons, it was impossible for her to allow Wingate to come to the Villa Graciosa. Even at the risk of arousing his further sus-

picions, it was necessary to keep him away from that sordid and shabby house.

So it was that Mary arranged to do the calling herself; she fixed an appointment outside the *Majestic* for ten o'clock the following morning.

"I hope you will enjoy yourself, dear," the Comtesse said in parting; "I have not been to the Tennis Club myself, but I believe it is very nice there. You will meet a lot of English people. And don't forget to ask your friend to dine with us to-night if possible."

Feeling something of a traitor, Mary smiled as though consenting to this arrangement. But directly she was free of the house, she determined it would never be with her consent that Wingate should come to the Villa Graciosa. Any meetings in future must take place outside.

The weather was perfect—it was one of those mornings on which the Riviera is seen at its incomparable best. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky, and there was sufficient breeze to cool the air agreeably.

All the world seemed abroad, as she got off the jangling tram in the Rue d'Antibes and cut through a side street leading to the Croisette. Everywhere were little throngs of happy people. The evil atmosphere which had seemed to her to overhang the town directly darkness fell, was now entirely absent; indeed, what the man she

was going to meet had told her about the place seemed impossible to credit in that clear morning light.

Wingate was already waiting, standing by the side of a luxury sports car.

He walked towards her eagerly.

"I ought to be thoroughly annoyed with you, Miss Mallory," he said, as they shook hands; "this sort of thing is not done—even on the Riviera. Why didn't you allow me to fetch you?"

She parried the question as best she could.

"Oh, it's such a dreadful long way, even for a car, and I don't get nearly sufficient exercise now. That's why," she added quickly: "I am so looking forward to the tennis this morning."

Wingate, attractively debonair in his flannels, thought he had never seen such an enchanting picture as his companion made. In her short tennis skirt and dark blazer, she looked the embodiment of English sporting youth.

It was risky to continue that scrutiny.

"Well, in you get!" he said quickly, warding off the danger: "I have booked a court, but all the same, we ought to be up there as soon as possible."

Mary sighed with sheer happiness as she sank into the extraordinarily comfortable seat by the driver's side. She had never longed for a great

deal of wealth, but what a difference to life having money could make! This car, for instance. . . . Wondering if Wingate himself would be so attractive if he did not possess all those desiderata which helped to make a man interesting, she was glad to find herself deciding that he would.

It was only a short journey to the Cannes Tennis Club, and within a few minutes, Wingate and she had passed through the attractive entrance and were being greeted by a fair-haired girl, wearing a blue bandeau round her head, who in herself was a very breath of England.

"I have kept your court, Mr. Wingate," said this girl, whom Mary was to discover acted as Games Secretary to the Club; "but I am glad you are on time, because we have a frightful rush on just about now."

"This is a friend of mine, Miss Mallory—Miss Patchway," said Wingate, introducing the two.

Mary took to the girl at once. There was no nonsense about her; she was frank and open, and an evident lover of sport.

"I shan't be long," added Wingate, turning away in the direction of the dressing-rooms, "in the meantime, Miss Patchway will show you round."

Mary turned to the girl.

"Oh, please don't trouble—you must be frightfully busy. I shall be quite all right by myself."

"Sure?"

"Quite."

"Well, we'll have a chat some other time. Delighted. Frightful rush now—so long!"

With this breezy commentary, Joan Patchway hurried off, leaving Mary to her own devices.

She looked round with interest. Whilst in England, reading about the big tennis matches of the Riviera had formed one of the principal inducements to her to visit the Côte d'Azur one day. And now, here she was in the most important Club on the Coast, apart from the monster new one at Monte Carlo.

It was a fascinating enough scene. Although so early in the morning—it was only just after ten o'clock—the courts were already filling up. The Club itself, so far as she was able to see, was rather disappointing—the accommodation seemed so limited—especially when it was considered that some of the greatest matches in the world were played there. But she quickly forgot this momentary disappointment in the interest of seeing possessors of world-famous names passing to and fro.

One of the first faces with which newspaper photographs had made her familiar, was that of

Lord Desbury, the British aristocratic Apollo of sport. The latter was walking to an end court, in company with a stoutly-built, swarthy man whom she heard referred to by a group standing near as the Club professional.

"A marvellous player, my dear," went on the informant; "he could beat any amateur in the world if the ridiculous authorities would only allow them to meet in a match."

The prospect of seeing this wonder-player in action caused Mary to stroll towards the end court.

She was watching with absorbed interest the professional and Lord Desbury having a knock-up, when her arm was touched.

"I thought you must have run away!" said Wingate, half seriously.

"Oh, no! I was just looking round. It's all so fascinating."

Wingate nodded.

"Yes. It's quite jolly. Like a bit of England itself. Nothing wrong here, either. No crime or crooks. But I'm getting morbid again. Come along; our court's waiting."

Wingate, she discovered, played tennis so well that he would have been able to give the average crack something of a game. He was miles better than herself, of course, but she was able to put up something of a fight. The quick

bound of the ball, and the dazzling light, were factors to be contended with, but at the end of a couple of sets, Wingate, who had scarcely turned a hair in the intense heat, congratulated her upon her display.

"With practice, you would be jolly good," he said; "we must have some more games. But now, I expect you could do with a rest."

"I don't intend to go yet," she protested good-humouredly.

"My dear child! As though I should allow you to go! What we are going to do is to have a long drink and listen to the gossip. Some of it is occasionally interesting, other bits are apt to be malicious—but then, you get that sort of thing in England as well as here."

The lounge was an agreeable enough resting-place. And Mary, feeling thirsty, thrilled to the number of attractive drinks which, typed on a piece of paper, were available for consumption.

She selected, after some consideration, an orangeade. This, brought to her by Wingate in a tall glass, frothing enticingly, proved quite the most fascinating thirst-quencher she had ever tried.

"I can quite understand the Riviera being attractive to people who come here," she remarked to Wingate, when he had offered her a cigarette. "This place is delightful."

Her companion nodded.

"Yes; now that the sun is shining. It is at its best, however, when the big matches are on—Mildren, the American crack, will be here next week playing against Lefébre—care to come?"

"I should love it." Then, recollecting: "That is, if I can get away."

Flicking the ash from his cigarette, he turned to her.

"Is there any special reason why I should not have called for you this morning?" he put directly.

Confronted by this very leading question, she had to compromise. She hated doing so, but there was no alternative.

"I preferred you not to," she said.

"That's enough for me—I won't intrude any further." Wingate's tone was that of a man who had received a disappointment.

For a moment, the temptation to tell him the whole truth, so far as she knew it, was very strong. She would have liked to have taken him by the arm and gone to the seat beneath the huge palm tree that had attracted her attention when entering the grounds. There, with no eavesdroppers near, she would have told him every detail about her visit to the Riviera. But something besides a natural reticence kept her silent; cowardice in the beginning had led

her partially to deceive him, and now she felt she could not risk losing his good opinion by confessing to the half-truths which she had uttered in the Galeries Fleuries.

So she kept silent, hoping against hope that the opportunity would occur later for her to divulge everything.

"Is it possible for you to dine with me one night?" Wingate now asked.

"It might be—but I am unable to forget that my time is not my own."

"This friend of yours——" He could get no further. It seemed impossible to credit that this girl was purposely deceiving him. It still seemed unbelievable to suppose that she was in the least degree crooked—the very idea was ludicrous—and yet, that friend of hers . . . an international criminal . . . Hell! Why didn't she come through? What could she be hiding?

There must be some mistake. This was the one consolation he had. Some time later on, the girl, evidently afraid now of the wretched consequences, might be induced to give him her confidence. And then everything would be made clear. Of that he was sure. In the meantime——

"Would you care to play again?"

"No—not this morning, I think; it's been rather strenuous, that single. But I'm coming here again."

"Of course you are!" He looked at his watch.

"Ten to twelve. Just time for a short run round. Would you like that? What time are you supposed to be back, by the way?"

"Oh, lunch-time will do."

She rose, and picked up her racket and hand-bag. A few quick touches to her hair, and she announced herself ready.

Outside, they met Joan Patchway.

"Come again, Miss Mallory. Don't forget—we shall be delighted to see you," said the Games Secretary, and with this parting benediction they went off.

The drive which followed, along the coast to Napoule and beyond, completed a morning of sheer delight. Mary could not remember ever having spent such a wonderful time. It was only when the bend in the road was reached just below the entrance to the Villa Graciosa, that a dark cloud came to shadow her mental horizon.

"Do you mind if I get out here?" she asked.

The frowning expression which had become so familiar to her during her brief acquaintance with the man, now gathered in Wingate's eyes.

She felt she could understand something of what he was thinking: Why doesn't she give me her confidence? Yes—that must be the thought in his mind.

But it was too late. Besides, it would lead

to all kinds of complications. But she promised herself this : if her position became too impossible at the Villa Graciosa, she would go to him for advice without fail.

Wingate made no comment, but immediately stopped the Rolls.

Springing down, he opened the door for her, and she got out.

" I cannot thank you enough for giving me such a marvellous time," she said, holding out her hand.

Wingate's frown gave place to a characteristically pleasant smile.

" If you like the medicine," he replied ; " please repeat the dose ! I have enjoyed every minute. If you *can* dine with me, give me a ring, will you ? "

She flashed him a smile as she turned away.

" Of course I will," she promised, and then was gone round the bend in the road.

CHAPTER XVI IN THE CASINO

WHAT was the " excitement " to which the Comtesse had referred the day before ? Did it concern José Santos ? Because, if it did, Mary found herself wishing she might be left out of it.

Even the thought of dancing with the man was obnoxious. Disliking her employer's nephew before, the manner in which he had greeted her upon his arrival from Paris had given her a fresh distrust and uneasiness. His manners were so elaborate as to become offensive.

But, when at tea-time, her employer made the announcement, she could not give a refusal. Besides, the prospect was alluring—even though she was to be in Santos's company.

"We—José and I—have decided to do a little celebrating to-night, Mary, dear," the Comtesse said as she poured the tea. "I suppose you have never played baccarat?"

"No."

"Then the experience will be something of a novelty. After dinner the three of us will go down to the Casino. Would you like that?"

"I should love it!" Mary replied, "but what about clothes? I am afraid I haven't anything very elaborate."

"That frock you have on will do quite well," was the response; "it suits you admirably—doesn't it, José?"

Santos showed his teeth in a ready smirk.

"You are right, my dear aunt," he said; "simple as it is, the frock shows off Miss Mallory's charm admirably."

Mary felt herself flushing. She wished the

man had not such an unpleasant manner of expressing himself. There was always a suggestion of sensuality lurking at the back of the words he used.

"But I shall feel quite out of it," she laughingly protested, turning to the Comtesse; "what I saw in the Croisette yesterday morning was sufficient indication of how women dress to go to the Casino."

Her employer patted her on the shoulder with a plump, well-manicured hand.

"You will be as attractive as any woman there, Mary, if only by force of contrast. If, after going to-night, you feel you want some smarter dresses, then I'll take you along to my man—he'll soon put you right. In the meantime, don't worry your pretty head—allow me to be the best judge."

After that, of course, there was no more to be said.

Mary was "all bubbly inside"—as she put it to herself—when the car stopped outside the imposing entrance of the Casino. It was like going to a theatre—only the performance inside the huge building, she felt sure, was likely to be far more interesting than any ordinary play. Even though José Santos was one of her companions, she tingled with anticipatory excitement.

It was all delightfully novel—the bowings of the officials, the kindly look which the elderly man, looking so immaculate in his evening dress, gave her as he made out her card of admission to the Baccarat Room, the general air of well-bred, sophisticated luxury which was everywhere apparent—and she responded to it instantly.

"It is too early for the gambling," said the Comtesse, "we will go to the Les Ambassadeurs and watch the dancing."

The famous restaurant, the name of which was already familiar to Mary, looked like a scene from dreamland as the dancers left the round tables and swung into the latest fox-trot.

"May I have the honour?"

What she had feared had come.

"I am afraid I have not had much practice lately, Mr. Santos."

"Never mind," he retorted quickly; "one can see you dance instinctively—you have such a graceful figure. Besides, one only walks through these things. You do not mind, aunt?"

"Of course not," said the Comtesse; "go off and enjoy yourselves. I only wish I were your age!"

Good manners compelled Mary to smile her thanks. As she looked at her employer, she was forced to the opinion, for perhaps the fifth time that night, that the Comtesse Zamoyski had

changed. It was difficult to put into words exactly what she meant, but the woman had toned down her striking appearance. She looked almost staid! Her gown, for instance, was much more discreet than customary, and what make-up she had used was extremely carefully employed. Looking at her, one might have assumed with every justification that she was endeavouring to appear thoroughly respectable. A great deal of her former flamboyancy had gone.

Santos proved, in spite of his lack of physique, a splendid dancer, and as Mary began to get the "feel" of the floor, she gave herself up to the pleasure of the moment. She forgot the man in whose arms she so lightly rested; he became an automaton, an impersonal equation. As a matter of fact, her thoughts allowed Santos no room; as she moved to the music she thought of the joy she would feel if ever luck allowed her to dance with her "Victoria Station man" on that splendid floor and to the strains of that wonderful dance band.

Would he bother about her again? Would he ring up—or would he forget? So much depended on the answer. She realised that. The excitement of the evening had gone to her head, had made her a little unbalanced, perhaps, but she knew her heart would be beating rapidly when she heard his voice on the wire. She laughed a

little in sheer happiness. If this was love, it was a thoroughly fascinating sensation.

"You are enjoying it, Miss Mallory?"

"Oh, awfully!"

She had to say something to cover her confusion. She had been dancing mechanically, giving no heed to her partner. That little laugh had been called forth by the thought that it was just possible Robert Wingate himself would be in the Casino that night—and that she might meet him. . . .

"You dance beautifully!"

This time she laughed outright. How ridiculously futile the compliment sounded coming from Santos! If Wingate had said it, she might have thrilled—*would* have thrilled if her present mood had possessed her.

"I am glad I haven't let you down," she replied, "but you are praising me extravagantly; some of the women here are marvellous."

"None so marvellous as you—you outshine them all, I swear it!"

The astonishing fact was that, in spite of the ridiculous theatricality of the words, Santos spoke as though he was perfectly sincere. His eyes were fixed on her face in a manner which was disquieting. It would be too absurd if this parody of a man started to make love to her. She was thankful that the band stopped just then.

"We must be getting back to the Comtesse," she said in a practical tone; "thank you for the dance, Mr. Santos." She would not allow herself to be pestered by this creature; a stop must be put to any such proposed nonsense right away.

"They are going to play an encore," said Santos; "don't you see them clapping?"

"You must excuse me dancing again—I am afraid the hot air has given me a headache."

A frown gathered on the tawny forehead.

"But you admitted that you were enjoying it a moment ago," Santos persisted.

"So I was—but, really, I do not feel like dancing again—not at the moment, anyway." She spoke decisively as one who had definitely made up her mind.

"I am entirely at your service." He bowed, but the expression on his face was lowering. Clearly he was annoyed.

Mary felt she could read his thoughts: "What right has this bit of a girl in a cheap frock, to whom it has pleased my aunt and myself to show such kindness, to refuse to give me a second dance? She'll turn me from a friend into an enemy if she isn't careful."

But, even at the risk of incurring the man's hostility, she was determined not to run any further barrage of compliments which, accompanied by glances from those too-inquisitive eyes, were

much too fevered for her liking. Later in the evening, perhaps, she would screw up her endurance again, but she wanted some time in between.

The Comtesse was discovered seated in the gallery overlooking the restaurant.

"Have you enjoyed your dance, my dear?" she asked.

Santos answered stiffly:

"Miss Mallory suddenly developed a headache—she finds the atmosphere too oppressive."

"Good gracious, child, don't say you are going to be ill!"

"Of course, I'm not! It was merely a temporary breathlessness due, I expect, to the unaccustomed exercise. And they do keep the room rather hot. But, please, do not think I'm not enjoying myself, because I am."

"That's all right, then. It would be too absurd if you had said that you wished to go home."

There was a suggestion of ridicule—and barbed ridicule at that—underlying the words which brought the blood rushing to the girl's face.

"I certainly shouldn't think of going home," she said determinedly.

"Then we will go instead into the Baccarat Room," declared the Comtesse.

As they skirted the big main room of the Casino, from which men and women were

streaming in a constant procession, Mary made an exclamation. A woman, elaborately and expensively dressed, had passed so close that she could have touched her arm—and as this woman went by, she distinctly saw her smile in a significant manner at José Santos.

The Comtesse turned impatiently.

"What is the matter?" she asked sharply.

"Nothing, Comtesse; I fancied I saw your maid pass—that was what made me exclaim."

"Nadja? Here? But how absurd! She is home knitting socks for her waiter-brother. You must have been mistaken."

"It was rather silly of me, I suppose," admitted Mary. She did not say any more, but, in spite of the Comtesse's incredulity, she felt she had not been mistaken; that flashy girl *had* been Nadja. Yet where had she obtained those expensive clothes? A maid masquerading as a pleasure-seeking woman of fashion—it was strange, even if it fitted in with the general atmosphere of unreality with which she was surrounded.

Her reflections were interrupted at this point by the keen-eyed man, standing by the side of a heavy revolving door, greeting her employer.

"*Bon soir*, Comtesse."

Her employer acknowledged the salutation, which Mary could not help noticing appeared to

have a slightly satiric edge to it, with a gracious smile. Then she turned to the girl.

"This is my friend, Miss Mary Mallory. Mary, my dear, where is your admission card?"

She produced it, and was rewarded with a bow.

"May the best of fortune be yours, Mademoiselle Mallory," said the man, handing her back the card.

For the fleeting space of a second, the speaker's eyes seemed to be sending her a message—a message of warning. Then the face became a mask once again—the mask of a man who must not allow his thoughts to be betrayed.

The heavy door revolved and she was inside the Baccarat Room, so famed in fiction and newspaper-gossip columns.

The first impression Mary had was the deep silence. This was unexpected. She had imagined the gambling went on to the accompaniment of a vociferous hubbub—men mouthing strange oaths and clutching their hair, women uttering shrill screams as the luck ran against them.

There was no fevered bedlam of this description. Everything was very restrained. A well-bred, well-mannered sophistication ruled. The men and women seated at the different tables might have been engaged in some polite social exercise instead of gambling away possible fortunes, whilst the onlookers, strolling languidly from table to table, or, seated on the divans

scattered here and there, conversed in cultured whispers. She might have been in a church.

"Well, my dear, is it anything like you pictured?" The Comtesse, after allowing the girl a few minutes in which to look round, had made the smiling enquiry.

"I imagined there would be far more excitement."

"That is what everyone says at their first visit. But icy composure and masterly restraint are the two qualities which represent good form here. Only the real aristocrats like the Earl of —— (she mentioned an illustrious English name) —or the King of—— (this time a picturesque European monarch)—can afford to show their real feelings. The celebrities have not arrived yet, so I suggest we take a little refreshment."

Off the gambling-room was a space devoted to the pleasant pastime of drinking—it must be pleasant, Mary thought, as she watched the faces of those either standing by the side of the bar or sitting near. Everyone appeared happy and contented.

Here the chatter was less restrained. Seated by the side of the Comtesse, waiting for the drinks to be brought to her employer and Santos —she had declined anything herself—she heard mentioned on every hand names which the newspapers had made already familiar to her—

names famous in that world where Society congregates: Molyneux, the Englishman dressmaker of the Rue Royale, Paris; a celebrated English actress, who was said to be plunging heavily; a well-known French courtesan whose liaison with an ex-Crown Prince had caused his country to disown him; an American Copper King whose yacht was now in Cannes Harbour; a playwright, a pampered darling, who had achieved wealth through castigating the very people amongst whom he lived—these, and many others.

Santos returned, followed by a waiter carrying the drinks on a tray.

The Comtesse raised her glass and smiled over the brim.

"Here's to your good fortune to-night, Mary, sweet," she said.

CHAPTER XVII A LESSON IN BACCARAT

THE phrase was puzzling—as puzzling as many other things about this woman.

"I suppose you wonder what I mean?" the Comtesse continued.

"I do—rather," was the reply.

"You dear, sweet child! Let me explain, then. I daresay you have heard that gambling such as goes on here—gambling, that is, on a big scale—is surrounded by superstition. For instance, it is considered frightfully lucky to sit in a chair next to a woman wearing pearls."

"But how ridiculous!" commented Mary.

"It sounds ridiculous, I know, and yet seasoned gamblers swear there is some truth in it. Is it not so, José?"

"Le Comte de Lépiney, who is one of the greatest baccarat players in the world—if we are lucky we shall see him here to-night—is so persuaded of the value of the superstition that he invariably brings with him a lady wearing a rope of extremely expensive pearls. One night last season he took £40,000 off the Greek Syndicate in this room. Mademoiselle Lejeune was sitting on his right hand. Her pearls were magnificent. I was here, so I know what I am talking about." Santos spoke with such an authoritative note that he bordered on the dogmatic.

Mary turned to the Comtesse.

"I am sorry I am not wearing pearls, Comtesse—that is, if you intend to gamble."

The woman stretched out a hand and placed it affectionately over Mary's.

"Now I'm going to let you into the little

secret that I have been saving up ever since luncheon," she said; "it is José's idea, really, and I cannot pretend to take any credit for it. I intend to let you gamble to-night, Mary—that is the excitement I promised you."

Mary's surprise was such that she could only stare in astonishment.

"Me!" she exclaimed; "why, I don't know the first thing about it. And I've never played for anything more thrilling than threepence a hundred bridge in my life!"

"Then you'll be widening your experience."

"But it's so silly," Mary continued to protest: "I simply can't afford it—I've only about eighteen shillings with me." The absurdity of coming to the Cannes Baccarat Room with the intention of gambling on a total sum of less than an English pound-note made her throw back her head and laugh.

The Comtesse waited until the peal of merriment was over and then she replied:

"I shall provide the money, of course. Apart from giving you what I hoped would be pleasure, it is another popular superstition amongst gamblers that the first time anyone not acquainted with the game sits down at baccarat, he or she is almost certain to win."

"Even if, like myself, one doesn't know the first thing about the game?"

The Comtesse dismissed the remark with a snap of her shapely fingers.

"Anyone with intelligence like yourself can pick up the rules of the game almost at once," she replied. "To begin with, six full packs of cards are used. Anything from three to eleven people may play, with a croupier—that is, an official of the Casino—in charge. Counters, which are usually purchased before you start to play, are used. When the game starts, the croupier takes a number of cards from the top of the pack and passes them to the person sitting on his right, who becomes banker. This position the player holds until he loses, when the deal passes to the player next in position. You understand ?"

"Yes—please go on ; this sounds thrilling."

The Comtesse smiled across at Santos before continuing :

"The general idea of the game is this : All the players, apart from the one holding the bank, are called punters. They all back their luck and the value of their cards against the banker. The latter puts down the sum he is prepared to stake and the punters do the same, unless one of them desires to play against the entire stake of the banker. In this case he calls *Banco*.

"After the stakes have been made, the dealer deals a card to the punter on his right, then one

to himself, then a third to the punter on his left and, finally, another to himself. All the cards are dealt face downwards. Court cards and tens count nothing; all others have the value of their pips.

"Each punter looks at his cards, and anyone having 8 or 9 turns his card up and announces it. This particular hand is then at an end. The player having the highest stake plays for both punters, and if the card he turns up is better than that of the banker, the latter pays each punter the amount of his stake. If not, the banker wins all stakes, and the game proceeds as before. As you see, it is quite simple."

"Supposing no punter holds an 8 or 9?"

"If no announcement is made, the banker deals another card to the player on his right, who, if his first card is, say, 6 or 7, will refuse it."

"Because he is afraid he will total with both cards more than 9."

"Exactly. He is afraid to overrun that number. This second card is turned face upward on the table. If his first card is, say, 5, he may decide to accept the second card. If he refuses, the card is offered to the second punter.

"When both punters have come to a decision, the banker has to make up his mind whether he will draw a card himself or expose his original ones. After making his play, he pays or receives

according to whether he has lost or won. Ties, I should explain, neither win nor lose, but go over to the next deal."

Although she had been listening intently, Mary had not failed to notice the somewhat peculiar behaviour of Santos during the time that the Comtesse had been speaking. The man had been showing increasing signs of impatience. He was apparently anxious to be off; either that, or he was expecting to see someone enter any moment. He had placed his chair in such a position that he commanded a view of practically the entire room, and yet so great was his anxiety that he kept leaning forward in order, Mary supposed, to catch the first possible glimpse of the person he was expecting.

For whom could the man be looking? Was it the maid, Nadja, masquerading that night as a woman of wealth and fashion?

The Comtesse took a thick roll of notes from her bag.

"Here is the equivalent of fifty pounds," she said; "José will get you counters for half this amount, and the rest of the money you can hold in reserve."

"Do you really want me to play?" asked Mary. The proposal still seemed rather preposterous.

The Comtesse stamped her foot.

"Should I have taken all the trouble to explain the rules of the game to you if I hadn't?" she said impatiently. "Hurry up, José."

The man left his seat with what appeared to be reluctance. He was soon back.

"We must be quick," Mary heard him whisper to the Comtesse.

She wondered why the mannikin had become so strung up.

CHAPTER XVIII THE MASCOT

THE message seemed to communicate to the Comtesse an equal degree of excitement. Disregarding Mary, they both looked in the direction of the Baccarat Room. One glance was sufficient for the Comtesse.

"Come quickly," she said to Mary over her shoulder; "you must start playing at once!"

The words were spoken in such a strangely abrupt manner that she would have liked to ask a number of questions. But some intuitive sense kept her silent. She was puzzled but curious—very curious. The Comtesse had some purpose in her mind; what it was she was eager

to discover. And the way to discover it was to remain quiet and to obey the instructions which she guessed would soon be given her.

Very alert, she followed the pair as they walked across the room. In front of them was a tall, thin, elderly woman whose most noticeable feature, apart from her aristocratic bearing, was a wonderful rope of pearls which enhanced the still beautiful skin of her neck and shoulders.

Mary felt her arm squeezed.

"You see," said the Comtesse tensely; "a woman with pearls! You must arrange to sit next to her. Don't miss any opportunity or I shall be angry."

The speaker, quite obviously, was possessed by a passion which overruled for the moment every other consideration. Evidently the Comtesse herself was a creature swayed by what she had described as a gamblers' superstition. But for this fact, and her previous determination to endeavour to discover what purpose her employer had in mind, Mary might have remonstrated, not only at the manner in which she had been addressed, but also at the pain she had been caused by that ruthless squeeze of her arm. As it was, she made no reply.

She noticed that her companions were not the only persons who became interested in the woman with the pearls. The latter left a ripple of

interest behind her as she strolled past the different tables.

Once Mary caught a whisper.

"Those pearls can't be real—no woman would be fool enough to run such a risk."

And the reply:

"My dear, the wearer is Lady Wentworth—'the Wentworth'. She isn't the woman to be afraid of any risk."

At the twenty-louis table the woman under discussion stopped. The Comtesse, close behind, caught Mary's hand and held it tightly.

"If she plays here, stand directly behind her so that you can slip into the next chair. Don't forget—it's very important." The voice had become harsh and brittle with anxiety.

In practically the next moment, and before she could say anything in reply, Mary found herself being pushed forward into a chair.

"Here are your counters, my dear," she heard the Comtesse say. Before her on the green cloth of the table were ranged a number of different-coloured *plaques*.

Whenever she looked back, the never-to-be-forgotten hour which followed always seemed to her to have no more substantiality than the fabric of a dream. She lived in a world that was utterly unreal and completely fantastic; it

was as though another person's mind had entered her body.

The most wonderful thing of all was that she was not confused—no, not even in that first pulsating moment when, sitting on the right of the *croupier*, she found herself holding the bank. She had the benefit of the whispered advice of the Comtesse, who was standing directly behind her chair, it was true; but, nevertheless, by some miraculous process, her brain became remarkably clear of its own volition, and she felt as composed as though this were merely a game of bridge instead of her first essay at nerve-testing baccarat.

She had laughed at the superstition which the Comtesse had mentioned, but the woman on her right wearing the pearls had certainly brought her luck.

Luck so amazing that the crowd which gathered quickly forgot the usual decorum and broke into comments of astonishment.

The counters, each representing twenty louis, with which she had started, rapidly changed, at first into a mound, then into a hill, and after that into a miniature mountain of plaques.

After the bank held by her had run ten times in succession, the woman on her right spoke smilingly.

"You are evidently in wonderful luck—do not lose your nerve."

The words were uttered in a friendly, cultured voice, and Mary warmed to the woman at once.

"I will try not to, Lady Wentworth," she said.

"You know my name?"

"I heard it mentioned when you came to this table."

The mobile mouth of the elderly gentlewoman shaped itself into a fresh smile.

"I should be known here—I have lost enough money in this room," she remarked, and then the play was on again.

Once more, the banker won—and then again and yet again. Fifteen times successively did the clear-skinned girl so unmistakably English, in the simple frock, who it was being whispered was paying her first visit to the tables, hold the winning cards. The number of winning *coups* threatened to break the record for the Casino.

"She must have won fifteen hundred pounds," said a voice behind her.

Mary turned, not with the intention of looking at the speaker, but because she wanted to rest her eyes—and in doing so, looked straight into the face of Robert Wingate.

She smiled instantly, but received nothing but a stony stare in reply. Wingate, the man from whom she had parted only a few hours previously

on the pleasantest of terms, looked at her icily.

The shock shook her nerve. The composure which the onlookers had remarked upon previously deserted her. She felt tremors in her limbs and her head began to throb. Reaction had come. She half rose in her chair.

A hand thrust her violently back into the seat.

"Play on!" she heard the Comtesse command stormily.

"I do not feel well—I shall not play any more." There was a quality in her voice which kept the Comtesse silent, although a stream of passionate vituperation was trembling on her lips.

The voice of the *croupier* broke in.

"It is still mademoiselle's bank."

"Can I pass it to this lady?" She indicated the woman with the pearls who had been sitting on her right.

"Most certainly, mademoiselle."

The rest was confusion—utter and complete. So dense had the watching crowd become, so frantic was the desire to sit in the chair which had brought the retiring gambler so much fortune, that Mary had merely a recollection of struggling desperately to get free, helped on the one side by José Santos and on the other by the Comtesse Zamoyski. Her first action when she was clear

of the throng was to look round for the man who, in her opinion, had insulted her so cruelly. But there was no sign of Wingate.

She was alone with her employer, Santos having gone away to see to the changing of the counters.

"Why did you speak to me like that?" she demanded.

She was on her dignity now, burning with a fierce resentment against everything—especially against this woman who had addressed her as though she were a slave. She had a revulsion from what had recently happened; that gilded room suddenly sickened her. She hated it.

"My dear, you must please forgive me. I apologise. In the excitement of the moment, I allowed my feelings to carry me away. Do you know that you won over fifteen hundred pounds?—that if your winnings which, you remember, I advised you to capitalise, had been covered each time you turned a card, you would have won a fortune running into perhaps a couple of millions? As it is, you will be the talk of the town for a week. Aren't you excited?"

The girl shook her head.

"I am very tired—and I should like to go home at once." What did it matter about the money? That look of icy contempt in Wingate's face had dealt her a blow from the shame of

which she felt she would never recover. It had made her feel utterly humiliated. She had not the will at the moment to probe this mystery; all she wanted was to be away from this hateful place.

Santos returned, his face beaming.

"Congratulations, Miss Mallory!" he said; "now do you believe in the Comtesse's favourite superstition?"

His aunt answered:

"Mary, poor dear, is feeling the strain—I am going to take her straight home, José—you needn't come."

"Thanks; if you don't mind, I'll hang on for a bit, and bring back the news."

Had Mary been less indifferent she would possibly have caught the look of significance which passed between the two, but, as it was, she followed the Comtesse out of the Baccarat Room with one thought uppermost. She yearned for the solitude of her bedroom with an intensity that was almost painful.

Little was spoken on the way back to the Villa Graciosa. The Comtesse kept her raging temper in check, realising that it would be bad policy to remind the girl of a scene which, for some unaccountable reason, in a second's space had changed from the pleasurable to the utterly repugnant. What could have caused this transi-

tion? The girl was a sane, completely stable, wholly sensible type; her level-headedness had threatened, indeed, to be a handicap in the near future. She was, moreover, extremely healthy and not in the least degree neurotic. What, then, had made her behave in such an extraordinary manner? Was it the way she had spoken to her? No, that could not have been the reason because, although she had clearly showed she resented the brusqueness, the change had come before then. The transformation had dated from the moment she had turned round. In that instant her expression had altered completely. Why? Had she seen someone she recognised? —someone she knew would not approve of her gambling? Some elderly relative, perhaps? But, according to her own story, she was alone in the world now that her aunt, whom she had nursed, had died.

She would get at the truth soon—but it could not happen that night.

The solution, when it came, was not supplied by Mary. It was brought to that shabby villa in Super-Cannes by José Santos when he returned from the Casino a couple of hours later.

"Where's the girl?" was his first question.

"In bed—and asleep, I hope," was the reply. "What happened after we left?"

"Lady Wentworth ran the bank another five times and won a pot. She seemed very pleased, talking to some friends about how she had found a mascot to-night."

His companion made a sharp exclamation.

"Do you realise what this means, José?" she said. "Luck is running our way, too. The next time Mary sees the woman they will become friendly—although Lady Wentworth may be a great lady, like the real aristocrat she is, she will speak to the plainly-dressed girl who brought her such luck—the girl whom she has herself described as a mascot. After that, it should be easy—leave the rest to me."

Santos did not share in her enthusiasm.

"There's a snag," he replied: "I suppose you have been wondering why the girl turned off as she did? Well, I can tell you. When she looked round and completely altered, she saw an Englishman named Wingate. This man is the nephew of Lady Wentworth—and if you ask me, he's come to Cannes to keep a watchful eye on those pearls."

A jewelled hand plucked at the woman's lower lip.

"Mary told me she met an Englishman she knew on the Croisette this morning."

"Did she tell you his name?"

"No. I assumed it was someone of no con-

sequence. At the worst a nonenity, at the best a man who might be useful if he had sufficient money."

Santos's dark face carried a frown.

"It's going to be damned awkward if this Wingate fellow tries to put his spoke in," he said.

"Rubbish!" was the Comtesse's curt comment.

But Santos was not prepared to leave it at that; he continued to discuss this new development.

CHAPTER XIX REVELATION

WINGATE waited until his aunt rose from the baccarat table, flushed by her success.

"It is, perhaps, too much to expect that you are now going home?" he enquired satirically.

"Why should I go home, dear boy?" she replied: "I have just won eight hundred pounds!"

"Such a victory surely calls for a mild celebration—have you had supper?"

"A capital idea," observed the winner "because I am feeling generous, I will be your

hostess, Bobby. But only on one condition, remember: I will have no long faces, no recriminations, and no lectures. Is it agreed?"

"I will make no promises."

His aunt shrugged her still attractive shoulders.

"Nothing you can say will affect my appetite—winning has given it a zest. You live so prosaically yourself, Bobby, that I do not suppose you have ever made the interesting discovery that excitement brings a tremendous longing for food."

"I am the original Simple Simon," he gently mocked; "let me sit at your feet and imbibe further wisdom."

It was not until the meal was over and Lady Wentworth was enjoying a cigarette with her coffee that Bobby said what was in his mind.

"I want you to take me seriously for once, my dear," he stated very solemnly; "you won to-night, as you say, but very near you was a notorious woman crook who had her eye on your pearls."

His listener touched the jewels in question.

"Ever so many people, I have no doubt, admired my pearls to-night. But they are still in my possession, as you may observe."

Bobby felt his temper slipping. In his anger he spoke sharply—and hastily.

"If that girl sitting next to you ever tries to

make up to you, cut her dead—that's my final advice," he said.

"Now you are being perfectly preposterous," replied his aunt; "you are losing absolutely all sense of proportion. Really, Bobby, I am beginning to feel very anxious about you—I honestly think you should consult a doctor."

"I'll add just this," he concluded; "that girl is here with a woman who was pointed out to me by no less a person than Dick Delabrae as being a notorious crook."

"Where was this?"

"At the Rosy Dawn Club only a few nights ago."

His aunt remained incorrigible.

"Dicky Delabrae has a very elastic imagination. And if every woman who was said to be a crook left Cannes to-night, how many would remain? In any case, I refuse to believe for a moment that the very charming girl who sat next to me at the twenty-louis table to-night was anything but what she seemed to be. Why, she even passed me the bank! Go home and sleep it off, dear boy!"

Wingate's ill-temper did not lessen as the night wore on. He reached his hotel at half-past one—an early hour for Cannes—but the thought of sleep was intolerable.

The memory of Mary Mallory's face at the Baccarat Room that night haunted him ; it was like a painfully disturbing vision.

What had caused that look of horrific surprise ? Was it her conscience punishing her ? Had she been startled by his unexpected presence just at the moment that she was consolidating her position with Lady Wentworth ? He knew it was a damnable suggestion, but did not the facts warrant it ?

He reviewed these facts again : Here was a girl who, although apparently innocent enough, associated with a woman whose reputation as a criminal was notorious. She had had the opportunity to explain this association, but had not done so. She was found sitting next to a woman whose pearls were worth a fortune. They were evidently on friendly terms. With the *camaraderie* which exists in a casino, it was understandable, in a measure, that Lady Wentworth should become friendly with the girl on her left who had experienced such an extraordinary run of luck, but the present circumstances ruled out any element of chance. Coincidence could not go so far as this. The girl was sitting by his aunt through set design—either on her own part, or through the instrumentality of the woman who called herself the Comtesse Zamoyski.

Then came a revulsion of feeling.

The memory of the conversation he had overheard at the Rosy Dawn a few nights before made him suddenly ashamed. He had been behaving like a cad, condemning the girl unheard. He had allowed influences entirely beyond Mary Mallory's control to prejudice him against her. To have snubbed her in the Casino that night—it was simply unforgivable. No matter what the provocation, he should have behaved decently. It might be that the girl had a good enough reason for keeping her association with the Zamoyski woman a secret—it might be that she was even a tool, an unconscious decoy.

As this thought flashed through his mind, he walked rapidly into the hall of the hotel. The night hall-porter hastened up to him.

"I want you to get through on the telephone to the Villa Graciosa at Super-Cannes—quickly, please."

The man bowed and went to his office.

Within half a minute he was back.

"The Villa Graciosa is on the 'phone, m'sieur."

Bobby's hand was a trifle unsteady as he picked up the receiver.

"Hulloa," he said, "is that the Villa Graciosa? It is. Good. Will you please tell me if Miss Mallory is there? She is . . . oh, she's gone to bed. Thank you; no, I'll ring up in the morning. . . . What name? Oh, tell her it was a friend

staying at the *Majestic*, will you? Thanks very much. Good night."

It was the Zamoyski woman at the other end. Had the girl really gone to bed, or was this merely an excuse to prevent Mary from speaking to him? But he would soon know; in the morning he was going to drive up to the villa and demand to see the girl herself. If necessary, he would use his aunt's name. That would open the gates, he felt certain.

CHAPTER XX OVERHEARD

MARY found it impossible to sleep. After another half an hour of vain endeavour, she sat up in bed and switched on the light. Then she lit a cigarette, thinking it would soothe her nerves. But it required a far more powerful narcotic than Virginia tobacco to bring her peace. Why had Wingate looked at her in that horrible way? What had she done to deserve it? He wasn't such a Puritan as to object to a girl playing baccarat, surely? No, that was ridiculous; there must be another reason.

Her offended pride kept her restless. The suspense became intolerable. An explanation

was due to her—and she was determined to have it. Whatever Wingate might think, she was going to ask him why he had treated her so contemptuously in the Baccarat Room that night. The man was a gentleman—or had appeared to be one. He would not refuse an explanation. For a moment she buoyed herself up with the thought that perhaps he could not have recognised her—he might have believed it was a stranger who was trying—horrid phrase—to "get off" with him.

But that could not have been the case, she told herself a minute later. No man's memory could possibly be so bad for faces as to fail to remember a person from whom he had parted only the previous morning.

She looked at her watch. A quarter to two. Late for home, but, according to the Comtesse, still early for Cannes. It was unlikely that Wingate would have gone to bed. He might still be in the Casino although, when she had looked round for him after that first bewildering surprise, he had disappeared—at least, she had not been able to see him.

She would ring him up at the hotel.

No sooner had this resolve come than she decided to act upon it. Her determination to get to the root of this mystery made every other factor appear valueless.

Slipping on a dressing-gown, she switched off the light and turned the key in her bedroom door. The next moment she was out in the cold passage.

Until the moment that she passed the door of the Comtesse's bedroom, she had not given any consideration to what her employer might say about using the telephone at that unusual hour.

The door of the room was closed. No doubt the Comtesse was in bed and sound asleep. There only remained Santos and that detestable maid whom, she felt, disliked her. But Santos had remained at the Casino, and, no doubt, the masquerading maid was still there—she had not heard any motor drive up to the villa since going to her bedroom.

She remembered noticing that the telephone was placed in a kind of alcove off the big hall. It was thus easily accessible from any of the reception rooms on the ground floor.

The whole house was still, but from a room on the left of where she now stood listening, after switching on the light, came the sound of voices. It was necessary for her to pass the door of this room in order to get to the telephone.

She had never been guilty of eavesdropping in her life before, but the first words she heard as she passed the door kept her rooted to the spot in horror.

It was Santos talking.

"I'm going to get that necklace if I swing for it. First of all, I will see to the man . . . yes, to-morrow. Then there will be no interruption. The rest I shall have to leave to you. We will meet as arranged in——" The voice broke off in brittle fashion.

"What's that light doing out there?" he cried: "someone's come in."

"Rubbish!" Mary recognised the voice of the Comtesse; "who could have come in? It's Nadja, no doubt." She raised her voice to call: "Nadja."

Mary was attacked by a swift and merciless sense of terror. She must get away—and without being seen. Everything depended on her not being seen. At the first sound of a scraping chair, she turned to flee, her hand brushing the switch of the electric light which gave the hall illumination as she ran.

She heard a snapped-off oath, but she was safely out of sight by this time and running up the stairs as fast as her trembling legs would carry her. The bedroom slippers she wore made no sound. Had they done so, she would have been betrayed.

By the time she reached her room—hidden away at the top of the house—her heart was threatening to burst. After locking the door,

she tore off her dressing-gown and got immediately into bed.

Her heart still raced. It seemed it would never slacken to normal pace. But it was beginning to quieten its alarming speed when a knock sounded on the door—a knock that was at once stealthy and yet peremptory.

Thank goodness, she had thought of this eventuality. The suspicion of the Zamoyski woman and her confederate, that mincing mannikin, who had now changed by the utterance of a few words from an absurdity into a horror, would certainly be directed against her when they discovered there was no Nadja, and she had tried to prepare herself for the ordeal which seemed inevitable.

Her heart started to race again—and at a greater speed than before. Soon, if it did not stop, she would be breathless. . . .

"Mary!"

The Comtesse was calling her.

Intuition made her wait another few seconds. They must not think she was lying awake; she had to be roused.

Another knock.

"Mary!"—again.

Afraid that her voice would betray her, she murmured a sleepy "hullo" in reply; and then, clenching her teeth, she got out of bed,

switched on the light and walked across the room. Turning the key, she opened the door.

Outside were the Comtesse and José Santos. The former seemed composed, but the latter's face was livid ; the man was breathing hard.

" Did you want me, Comtesse ? I am afraid I was asleep." She had to lie.

" I thought I heard you call—and that you were not well, dear," was the reply.

Kindly enough words, but looking at the pair, and catching the gleam in Santos's eyes, Mary felt an unnerving fear strike her another blow.

CHAPTER XXI A GIRL VALIANT

TERRIFIED as she was, she had to speak—to make some intelligent reply.

" It's very kind of you, Comtesse ; I'm perfectly all right now, thank you."

" Headache better ? "

" Much."

" Have you been asleep ? "

" I suppose I must have been." This lying was hateful, but she had no alternative. And she felt she was serving a good cause by such evasion of the truth.

The woman stood smiling for a few moments.

"If you don't mind, I'll get back to bed—it's cold. . . ."

The Comtesse roused herself from the reverie.

"Of course, my dear—how thoughtless of me!" She stepped into the room.

"I'll tuck you up," she added with a smile which Mary, however ingratiating she might have considered it normally, now deeply suspected. But what could she say?

Then annoyance forced a protest.

"Was it necessary for Mr. Santos to come with you?" The continued presence of the man at the door gave her voice a ringing indignation.

The Comtesse made a quick reply. She was a sharp-witted woman.

"José was as anxious as myself," she explained; "he said he could not rest contented until he was assured that you were all right."

"I trust you bear me no malice on that account, Miss Mallory?" asked the man. His voice, instead of oozing honey as usual, now seemed to drip poison.

"It was very considerate of you," she replied, draping the dressing-gown more securely about her, "but now I must wish you good night."

"Yes—Mary wants to get back to bed. José—wait for me downstairs."

The Comtesse, to give effect to her instructions,

closed the door in the man's face, and then turned round to Mary.

"He was frightfully worried, my dear; I am almost persuaded that he is on the brink of falling in love with you."

"I sincerely hope not," commented Mary, taking off her dressing-gown and getting into bed. Although the presence of the woman was disturbing, her pride would not allow her to show any fear.

The Comtesse lived up to her promise by tucking her in. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Why," repeated Mary, "because the idea of Mr. Santos being in love with me, as you put it, is repulsive. Please do not let us talk about it."

"Very well—we won't, dear," concurred the woman with surprising affability. "And so you have been asleep. For how long?"

"How can I tell?" She sat up in bed. "Comtesse, will you be kind enough to explain why you are asking me all these questions?"

"Because we have had a burglar in the villa and I wondered if you had been frightened."

Conscious that the woman was still regarding her acutely, she made the reply which appeared most appropriate.

"A burglar? Where is he? What did he do?"

"He cleared off before he could do any mischief —got frightened, I suppose. José and I were talking about you in the little room a few minutes ago when we heard a noise in the hall. José rushed out just in time to see a masked man rushing towards the door, but was too late to catch him."

"What makes you think the man was a burglar?" was Mary's answer to this astonishing story.

"What else could he have been? Anyway, you need not be alarmed, my dear—the scoundrel will be too afraid to come back to-night, I expect, and to-morrow I shall get into touch with the police. So glad you were not frightened by the brute." The woman bent down, and Mary was forced to suffer the degradation of being kissed.

"Sleep well, dearest," were the visitor's parting words as she took a final look round the room.

"Oh-h!"

After that drawn-out shudder of disgust, she felt better. The blessed relief of being alone! The air remained polluted by her presence—the perfume she used still lingered—but the woman herself had gone.

The hypocrisy of the creature! She had not

known whether openly to accuse her, but every word she had uttered had been a lie, of course. Like the jungle creature she so closely resembled in certain moods, she had come prowling on the search for clues. Had searched—but had not found. And had now gone away baffled? Perhaps.

Mary knew that she herself was not baffled. Everything had become dazzlingly clear to her. All those mystery-bits which had perplexed her before now fitted into the puzzle perfectly. The suspicions which, however disturbing, had been merely vague before, had now crystallised into actual facts.

She was the associate of a gang of crooks.

So many facts now assumed a sinister significance—the behaviour of that maid in the London flat, the uneasy moments she had spent with the self-styled Comtesse when doubt and perplexity about the woman had rioted in her mind, the instinctive dislike she had had of José Santos, the appearance of the girl Nadja, dressed like a courtesan in the Casino that night. . . .

Jessie had been right—and she had been a fool, a stupidly-obstinate fool. So much had been clear to her from the beginning, and yet she had gone on.

It seemed a severe punishment, but she must face it.

Apart from herself, however, there was an entirely different problem. She had the knowledge that a crime was being organised against a woman who had been particularly kind to her. What was she to do? Obviously, she must try to prevent that theft. But how?

There were three courses open to her. The first was to inform the police, the second was to confide in Robert Wingate, and the third was to depend upon her own ability to cope with the situation.

She analysed the different avenues.

First, the police. Would they credit her story? As yet she had no proof. Was part of an overheard conversation sufficient?—would the detectives, or whoever listened to her, consider it enough? She doubted it. They would be more inclined to scoff.

Secondly, Robert Wingate. After his treatment of her at the Casino that night, would he pay attention to what she said? Would he be sufficiently interested in a woman who in all probability was a complete stranger? Again she doubted. And would he believe her story that she had acted innocently in consenting to come to the Riviera with people whom she now knew to be dangerous criminals? Although in the heat of her temper, she had intended to ring the man up half an hour before, yet now that her rage had

cooled she felt she could not subject herself to any further humiliation from him.

The third course seemed the best. She must act herself: as soon as possible she would go to the Casino, obtain the address of Lady Wentworth and explain the position to the latter who, being a lady, would understand. In the meantime, she must pretend at the Villa Graciosa not to know anything, and follow out the wishes of her employer until she had sufficient evidence to unmask the conspiracy.

So, determined, she waited impatiently for the dawn.

CHAPTER XXII THE AMBUSH

Two miles away, in a sumptuous bedroom in his luxury hotel on the sea front, Robert Wingate rose at the first sign of light and rang for the *valet de chambre*.

"I am going out early," he announced.

"M'sieur will want his bath," replied the servant, and vanished.

Half an hour later Bobby had left the hotel. The sun was rising in riotous splendour behind

the Maritime Alps. Wingate watched—and a great wonder filled his soul. A great wonder, and a great contrition. Now that he had the world to himself, he had space in which to think clearly. The air soothed and cleansed. He had been a cad the night before, and he would know no rest until he had made amends. At the earliest possible moment he would see Mary Mallory and humbly ask her pardon. That was why he had risen with the dawn. Before she was awake he would be at the Villa Graciosa waiting. . . . And he would go there on foot like a pilgrim walking to a shrine. . . .

The resolve did something to ease his mind, but he knew he would not be wholly content until he had looked into the girl's eyes and seen happiness and faith dawn in them. Oh, God! how could he have done it? Because she was seen with crooks, to think . . . he must have been mad. Perhaps it was the sight of that chocolate-coloured swine hovering at the back of Mary Mallory's chair which had sent the poison rushing to his brain.

What he proposed might not be so easy, however. If this Zamoyski woman and her dago partner were really "out" for Lady Wentworth's pearls, as seemed likely, they would have prepared for eventualities—his unexpected turning up at Cannes, for instance. It was difficult to believe

that they did not know his relationship to the woman they were plotting to plunder.

Which switched his thoughts for the moment off Mary Mallory. Directly he had seen the girl, he would buzz back to the *Chester* and have another attempt at trying to convince his aunt that there was very real danger to her so long as she persisted in flaunting those beastly pearls before everyone's eyes. If she was still stupidly obstinate, he would call in that French Secret Police bloke, Joubert, and put the whole thing before him. But he would have to get Mary—how tenderly feminine her name sounded—away from that woman first.

As he kept on his way, breathing the fresh, crisp air and feeling for the first time in his life that he was his own overlord—a man working out his destiny—he argued what he should do if he were refused admittance to the Villa Graciosa, the whereabouts of which he had ascertained from the *valet de chambre* back at the *Majestic*. In all probability the crooks would not be up. A servant would answer his ring—and a servant on the Riviera he had always heard was the last word in veniality. He was prepared to give a monstrous tip for a message to be taken privately to the girl whose safety he was determined to ensure. Perhaps a note would be better than a verbal message. Yes, he hadn't thought of that.

Fumbling in his pockets, he found an unused *Majestic Hotel* envelope. Tearing off the back of an old letter, he scribbled :

" DEAR MISS MALLORY,

" *I have a full and, I hope, satisfactory explanation of my abominable behaviour in the Casino last night. I hasten to let you know this so that you may suspend judgment until we meet. In the meantime, I humbly ask your forgiveness.*

" *There is a far more important matter, however. It is this : I have learned on the best possible authority that so long as you are in the Villa Graciosa you are in very real danger. I cannot say any more until I see you.*

" *If it is possible, I should like you to leave immediately. I shall be outside waiting and I will see that no harm comes to you.*

" *Please regard this seriously. I am in earnest.*

" *Show this to no one, but come immediately.*

" *Yours very sincerely,*

" ROBERT WINGATE."

The note wasn't all that he could have wished, but it was the best he could contrive at the moment. What omissions there might be in it he could explain when they met. There was the chance, of course, that the girl would not forgive

him for his caddish rudeness the previous night. Well, he'd have to risk that.

It was getting quite hot now, and he took off his hat to cool his forehead which was moist with perspiration. Even to those in the best of condition, a walk up to Super-Cannes is a test.

Resting for a while against a wall overlooking a stream that tinkled its way down from the mountains, he lit a cigarette and was grateful for the brief rest. Seven o'clock. An unheard-of time for the night-birds of Cannes to be about. An hour this for the tennis cracks to do their physical jerks, but not women of the Zamoyski class. It should be easy.

He imagined he was alone—that he had this gloriously fresh, early-morning world entirely to himself. So far he hadn't met a soul on this walk—not even a Cannois workman sauntering to work, a Provençal song on his lips and the inevitable umbrella tucked under his arm.

Bobby did not know the truth—and the truth was that ever since José Santos had made a certain telephone call to a hatchet-faced waiter at the *Majestic Hotel* the night before, Wingate had been under the closest observation. Had he troubled to glance back during that upward climb, he might have seen two men wearing clothes of the working class trudging doggedly behind. It was these two men who, now that

his back was turned to them again, crept stealthily behind him as he turned a corner.

Bobby had been so certain he was alone that he had given no thought to the possibility of being followed, but suddenly he realised, with a quick and vivid sense of surprise, that he was in danger.

The attack came with dramatic swiftness. Soft, padding footsteps like an animal's—and he felt hands clutching at his throat from behind. Heated with rage, he flung himself round.

There were two men—from where they had sprung he did not know, for he had heard no step or even breath—and they meant business. The quiet purposefulness with which they went about their hideous task showed that.

Both were armed—one held a long-bladed knife, whilst the other swung a thick roll of what looked like black rubber—an effective knocker-out, he should imagine.

He went for the nearest—the fellow with the knife. That such a swine should be alive at all, polluting the clean air of that wonderful morning, was bad enough, but that he should be standing there, running the fingers of his left hand down the long blade of that wicked-looking knife . . .

Bobby managed to evade the swing the man made at him—had that knife-thrust landed, he would have bled to death very quickly—and was

so occupied with squeezing the evil life out of the rat that he overlooked the fact that the man had a companion.

The realisation came with the blinding force of a tremendous truth : something crashed upon his skull over his right temple and, with the black waters of unconsciousness sucking him down, he fell to the dusty road.

The whole thing was over within a couple of minutes.

CHAPTER XXIII AN ALLIANCE IS FORMED

JESSIE STEVENS, in spite of her occasionally overwhelming vitality, had periodical moods of depression.

She was suffering from one now. As she looked out of the hotel window, and saw the rain descending in a steady downpour, she was attacked by a feeling of despondency so acute that it threatened for the moment to master her.

Searching in her mind for a possible cause, she decided that one influencing factor was the continued silence of Mary Mallory. In spite of her promise, Mary had not written. Why ?

Thought of her friend had never really left

Jessie since the moment of parting. In her heart, she admired Mary, although telling her in so many words that she was a fool to behave in such a manner. But that trip to Cannes had not been wholly satisfactory; she had been positive of it from the beginning; and now that no letter had come from the South of France, Jessie's doubts began to pile themselves up until they assumed a very mountain of distrust.

Yet, what could she do? Mary was of age, and her own mistress; what was more, she had told her, in quite a pointed manner, that she was fully capable of looking after her own affairs.

But that visit to the Hanover Street flat. . . . She hadn't liked it. She hadn't liked it one little bit. Dick Delabrae had promised to make enquiries, but an enforced visit to Paris had made him go back on his word.

She had done a little detective work on her own—going to the house, and enquiring from a rather begrimed hall-porter if there was a flat to let in the building.

She had not cared for the look the man gave her. Her knowledge of the world enabled her to interpret the fellow's expression. As plain as words, his glance had said: "You're not the sort we have here—what's the game?"

He had gone to the extent, however, of saying that there was nothing available at the moment.

Then she had carried her investigation a little further.

"The reason I came here," she said, "was because a lady who used to have a flat at this address was a great friend of mine." A lie, of course, but Jessie never minded telling a thumper in what she considered a good cause.

"Oh, yes."

The man's indifference amounted almost to an insult.

This had goaded her.

"The Comtesse Zamoyski," she continued.

The effect on the hall-porter of this high-sounding title was not reassuring. The man checked a furtive grin, and then turned away as though not wishing to continue the conversation.

Jessie, much against her will, drew out a pound note.

"I must thank you for all the trouble you have taken," she said in a tone of marked sarcasm.

But the sarcasm went unheeded once the coarse fingers tightened on the note.

"She was a funny 'un, the Comtesse," expatiated the man, his loquacity fired by the bribe.

But when Jessie began to press the matter further, the source of information dried up. The man either was afraid, or did not intend to give any further particulars about the celebrity who had recently left the first-floor flat.

Smoking an after-lunch cigarette, the memory of that visit passed again through Jessie's mind as she sat bored to complete melancholy. With all London to choose from, she hadn't an idea of how to spend the afternoon. There were so many things to do—but they all seemed obvious and footling.

In an extremity like this, she had always referred to the entertainment columns of the newspaper.

Picking up the *Daily Mail*, she turned to the leader page and ran her eye down the theatre guide.

"Absolute punk!" was the decision she came to after perusing the list of matinées. "I'll go to a talkie."

The enticing title, "The Sky Hawk," caught her eye, and seeing that the picture was being shown at her favourite picture house, she rang the bell and ordered the page-boy to get her a taxi.

A quarter of an hour later she was seated in a comfortable stall, costing approximately a fourth of the price she would have paid at a theatre, and was intent upon the opening of what turned out to be a really magnificent film.

Jessie, being a connoisseur and an enthusiast of the screen, had no false illusions about the film productions of her own country. Although patriotic to the backbone, she shared the opinion

of so many thousands of her country-people that the British film industry was either in entirely wrong hands, or that England did not possess the necessary talent to produce something really worth while. She inclined to the former view.

In spite of often ridiculous boosting by the film critics in the London newspapers, she had only seen one British film of any real distinction within the past three years; and this, when compared with the best of Hollywood, sank rapidly in depreciation.

It annoyed her intensely to read the scoffings that were directed against the film directors of America. Faults they had in plenty, of course; but on the not too rare occasions when they exerted themselves, they proved indisputably that they possessed every artistic quality needed to make a perfect picture.

Naturally, Hollywood, with its immense resources, could buy the world's best. But, even so, they made no mistake when they bought. Beauty, romance, youth, every physical enchantment, were theirs to put on the screen; but they utilised all to the best possible advantage, and often-times these priceless qualities were wedded to exceptionally fine background stories.

"The Sky Hawk," proved a leader in its own class. Apart from its brilliant direction, it had the advantage of English-speaking actors. And

the heroine was so delightful that one forgave her slight American accent.

Altogether, Jessie, the most scathing critic of anything second-rate, sat enthralled as the story wound itself to a close.

"Thank Heaven, no one can see me," she said to herself, as, moved entirely out of herself and into a state bordering on ecstasy, she felt tears dimming her lids as the heroine, at the conclusion of a heart-gripping scene, left the British airman who was shortly due to leave for the front—the period of the story was the now fashionable one of the war—with a confession that she loved him.

Jessie had just taken a handkerchief from her handbag, and was about to wipe those incriminating wet lids, when she was rudely jolted out of imagination back into reality.

An attendant, with the inevitable torch, was directing a man to the empty seat beside her. The man was on the large side, and showed the habitual clumsiness of a male entering a cinema. He blundered against her knees—knees which, owing to her hatred of anything entangling, were always somewhat freely exposed—and then muttered an incoherent apology.

But she had been able to recognise the voice.

"You ass, Dick! Didn't you see it was me?"

"My hat!" boomed a voice that could be

heard all over the ground floor. "You don't say it's you, Jess?"

"Idiot!" came the reassuring retort, "do you think I'd talk like this to a strange man?"

"Sit down there!" flared a grating admonition from the back.

Fixing his monocle upon the offender, whom he was entirely unable to see, Lord Delabrae subsided awkwardly into the inadequate seat.

"Poisonous blighters come to these places," he informed his companion.

"Hush! They may call the commissionaire!"

"Wish they would," came the rejoinder; "I had some rotten port for lunch, and I feel like murder!"

However, the gossip writer of the *Sun* yielded to soothing influences, and soon resumed the deportment of a normal being.

Perhaps because he was more interested in Jessie Stevens than the shadow figures on the screen, he announced his intention of accompanying her to tea when the film came to a close.

Jessie, who desired nothing quite so much, immediately protested against the suggestion.

"But you haven't seen the film," she said; "it's awfully good—quite a wonderful talkie."

"My dear," said Delabrae, with a charm that

belonged to his ancestry, "I would rather see you eat buttered toast than anything else in life. Come along."

So they went—across the street to Rumpelmeyers—at which place they were received with a ceremonious *éclat* which both, put on oath, would have admitted was highly agreeable.

At a discreetly situated corner table, Delabrae looked across at his companion, and found her good.

"What I can't understand, old thing," he remarked, with the boyish frankness that was such a characteristic of the man, "is why you and I don't run across each other more often."

If anyone had told Jessie that her usually reliable heart would commence to back-fire in that manner merely because a nice man had paid her a somewhat obvious compliment, she would have laughed the traducer to scorn. But there it was. After so many years, too. . . .

"It's your own fault, Dick," she replied in a tone that sounded cold, but was actually the reverse; "you're always hooting off to some place or other."

"I know." He shook his head sadly, as though acknowledging a distressing weakness. "But I can't help it. It's all in the way of business. For instance, to-morrow I'm buzzing down to the Riviera. The boss wants a page of gossip

about the world, the flesh and the Casino crowd at Cannes."

He gave the order to the waitress, and then turned to his companion again.

"I say," he said quickly; "what about coming with me? Of course, there might be a little scandal—I being at present the most notorious person in London——"

Jessie touched with slim fingers the hair that had been waved only that morning by Sarel.

"Scandal doesn't worry me; in fact, I rather thrive on it. Yes—I think I'll come—not to please you, though. I have something else in mind."

Delabrae choked.

"Don't tell me you have an affair with a gigolo?"

"Might. Who knows? No, to be serious, it's like this: do you remember me talking about a pal of mine I called the 'mouse-kid'—you know, that night we were dancing at the Rosy Dawn?"

Delabrae frowned.

"M'm. Mixed up with a bad egg you said lived in a flat in Hanover Street. Wasn't that it? Didn't I promise to look into it?"

"You did, you lazy hound. Well, she went with that woman to Cannes as a companion. I tried to put her off it, but it was no good. She practically told me to mind my own business.

But here's the worrying part: Mary—that's name—promised to write, but she hasn't. I'm m. nervy about it. She's a dear, sweet kid, and anything's happened to her, I should feel responsible."

"Why? You did all you could."

"I know. But she is absolutely a child, so far as the world is concerned—kept away from everything by an invalid aunt for years and years and years. Now comes out and feels that everything is intoxicating—you know the type."

"M'm. Well, if you go, you can look her up. In the meantime, why worry? Why not devote yourself instead to such a worthy object as Richard D? Here have I been wasting my nights in sleeplessness, and—Jessie, old dear, I'm going to tell you something. I'm worried, too."

"I wouldn't have given you credit for that amount of mind, Dick."

"Scoffer! But let me get on, won't you?"

"Well, get on."

"I'm finding myself thinking far too much about you. It's eating into my vitals. What do you say to that?"

"I think you ought to get advice."

"That's why I have lugged you here."

"Why? To get advice?"

"M'm."

The situation was developing at too rapid a

Jessie wrinkled an adorable forehead.

"I think you're rather disgusting this afternoon—and I'm going to leave you straight away." She rose.

"Not before we have fixed up for to-morrow. What time can you be ready?"

"Directly I have had breakfast."

"Righto! I'll call round about ten o'clock. By the way, where do I call? You seem to have as many addresses as the Wandering Jewess!"

"Keep your repartee for the *Sun*, dear lad," she recommended; "at the moment, I'm staying at the *Jules Hotel*, Dover Street. And if you're coming with me, you must come now—too many of those cakes won't improve your figure!"

"That's a nasty one!" replied Delabrae, who was sensitive on the topic of his physical bulk.

The best of friends, they left the tea-shop together.

CHAPTER XXIV THE END OF PRETENCE

THE Comtesse looked at her commiseratingly.

"You still don't look quite yourself, dear," she remarked.

Here was a Heaven-sent excuse.

"It's my head," she replied; "I wondered if you would mind me going down to the town to see a chemist?"

Quickly all her hopes were dashed.

"I shouldn't be satisfied with any chemist, Mary. You go back to bed and I'll call a doctor in—I have had a very good Frenchman recommended to me."

The prospect turned her almost sick with dread. Did the woman suspect anything? In spite of her visit the night before, was she still in doubt about the story she had been told?

And then—that doctor? Suddenly she became so stiff with terror that the desire to rush out of that sun-filled room became almost uncontrollable. This fear was not inspired by physical cowardice, but through the dread that if she were incapacitated, the plot against an unsuspecting woman would be successful.

"No, my dear, you certainly must not go out to-day," she heard the Comtesse add on a note of finality; "you look feverish to me, and Cannes is notoriously dangerous to anyone with any suspicion of a temperature. It's the sudden changes, you know. I hear there is an epidemic of bad throats in the town; you may be sickening for something of the sort."

She had to put up some sort of resistance.

"But I'm quite sure I haven't any temperature

—it's just my head. Honestly, I shouldn't think of going to bed."

The Comtesse remained firm.

"I am responsible for you, Mary, and you must please do what I consider is best. Now do not let us have any further argument—you go back to bed, and I will telephone for the doctor. Oh," she added quickly, with a look which Mary had no difficulty in interpreting, "I shall not be able to 'phone the doctor because "—there was a pause —"something has gone wrong with the line. There has been a breakdown, I expect—the telephone system is not very efficient on the Riviera."

"That will save you the trouble of speaking to a doctor at all, then, Comtesse—for I certainly should not see him if he called."

The woman gave her a quick, darting glance.

"You are not going to be difficult, I hope, Mary?" she said.

"If you mean by 'difficult,' refusing to go to bed when I am not really ill, I am afraid I am." Then remembering all that depended on her: "but please do not think I wish to be obstinate in any other way." All the time she was speaking her brain was rapping out a message: "You must get away quickly . . . she will try to keep you here . . . that was a lie about the telephone . . . she really does suspect . . . your life may

depend upon you getting away . . . that was a clumsy excuse about wishing to go down to the town to see a chemist, and she saw through it at once."

To get away quickly—it was the only chance.

"Please excuse me a minute, Comtesse—I want to fetch a handkerchief."

"I will ring for Nadja"—but directly she had spoken Mary had turned and walked rapidly out of the room. She affected not to hear the reply.

She would have run had she dared. Directly she was out of the house, she *would* take to her heels, but in the villa such speed would have doubled any suspicion already existing.

She did not go to her room, of course—but instead of turning to the left, where the staircase was situated, went straight on. She could explain to Marthe, the old French cook, that she was going out into the grounds that way. At the back there was a small iron gate opening on to a road. Once out there, she would ask the first passing motorist to give her a lift into Cannes. She would go to the *Majestic* and ask for Wingate. She would tell him the whole story. He would understand, he would be certain to understand. . . . It all seemed so simple.

Simple until, with a quick, backward glance, she approached the door of the kitchen. Then a hand reached out and seized her wrist.

"She's trying to get away!" screamed a voice which she recognised at once as belonging to Nadja, the masquerading maid. "I always said her innocence was too good to be true. Catch hold of her other arm, José, if you don't want her running to the police."

With the desperation that despair gave her, Mary struggled. But both her assailants were relentless—the girl especially so. The hatred which Nadja had formerly evidenced in look now took on a physical form. With every fresh indignity she committed, she gave a shrill exclamation of pleasure. It was utterly beastly.

When she was entirely overcome, her strength utterly spent, the final touch was added.

Smoking a cigarette, the Comtesse Zamoyski appeared on the scene.

"Tie her up, take her to her room and lock her in," she ordered.

"You arranged things very nicely, José—I am quite pleased with you," remarked the Comtesse. The two were sitting on the sun-drenched balcony a few minutes after Mary Mallory had been locked, a closely-bound prisoner, inside her room. "Where was Wingate taken?"

"To a place in Nice from which he will have considerable difficulty in escaping."

"But where?" persisted his companion.

"The House of Hell," was the reply.

"I agree," said the Comtesse slowly, "that he will have difficulty in escaping from there, providing, of course, you have passed him over to the right people."

"Giovanni and Berthchod are seeing to it." Santos smiled as one expecting approbation.

"We can depend on them," responded the Comtesse, giving him back smile for smile.

In this casual way did these two discuss the terrible fate which they knew must await the Englishman. There are many lurid accounts of the indescribable things to be witnessed at such places as Port Said, Cairo, Naples, and in the underworld of practically any capital, but it is generally conceded by those who know that the establishment styled succinctly as "The House of Hell," which is a large building situated not many hundred yards distant from the famous Promenade des Anglais at Nice, is where the Devil performs his choicest handiwork.

Only the merest hint can be given here of what takes place nightly inside the House of Hell. There is a possible danger in going there even as a member—but there is a very real and terrible risk in going there as a prisoner, a prospective subject for blackmail, and such was the fate which had been arranged for Robert Wingate. Beneath the House of Hell are veritable catacombs of

secret passages. Here many a man has been done to death and his fate remains for ever a mystery.

"The coast now seems clear," summed up the Comtesse; "I think I will look into the Casino this afternoon and have a word with Lady Wentworth."

Santos smiled in understanding.

CHAPTER XXV — AN EVENING AT THE VILLA GRACIOSA

Lady Wentworth listened with apparently the greatest interest to what the woman on the other side of the table was saying. It was the *thé dansant* hour at Les Ambassadeurs.

"I cannot promise you a gamble, Lady Wentworth," the smooth, admirably-controlled voice went on, "but I think I can give you some good music after dinner. Midal has agreed to play and Sophie Conway, the soprano, to sing. My niece, Miss Mary Mallory, would be enchanted if you would come."

"Is that very charming girl who passed me the bank last night your niece, Comtesse?"

"Yes, my brother, an American, married an Englishwoman. When both her parents died five years ago, I took Mary under my wing. She is a very dear girl and I have grown awfully fond of her."

"I can very well believe it. Well, since you have been kind enough to go out of your way to invite me, I think I will come to-morrow night—if only to have the joy of meeting such a radiant creature as your niece again. Tell me, where is this place of yours? What do you call it?"

"The Villa Graciosa. It does not belong to me—I am merely renting it for the season. If you will tell me the name of your hotel I will send a car to fetch you. We dine at eight. Music will be from nine until eleven, and afterwards perhaps we could make up a party for the Casino. My niece is anxious to try her luck again."

"I am staying at the *Chester*. I will be ready at twenty minutes to eight to-morrow night if that will allow sufficient time."

"The car shall be there, Lady Wentworth. Mary will be charmed to know that you are coming."

"Tell her," replied Lady Wentworth, not to be outdone in courtesy, "that I am looking forward to sharing a bank with her."

The Comtesse Zamoyski smiled.

"I will," she said.

The parting between the two was of the most friendly description.

There were two reasons why Lady Wentworth had decided to accept this unexpected invitation. The first was to teach her nephew, Bobby, what she considered he needed very badly—namely, a salutary lesson. She desired to demonstrate to him two things. The first was that she was quite capable of conducting her own affairs and, incidentally, of looking after herself, and secondly she wanted to prove that he was entirely wrong in making the malicious statement that the girl to whom she had taken such a fancy was an associate with crooks. To be on the safe side, she was not going to wear her pearls on this visit to the villa perched away in some preposterously inaccessible position in Super-Cannes (these were now resting securely in the hotel safe), but that had been merely an elementary precaution. She might be attacked during the journey to or from the villa.

That was the first reason—to be able to prove to Bobby that he had been entirely wrong in his surmises and fears.

The second was that she really had been very attracted to that delightful English girl. There

might be something rather peculiar about the aunt—there *was* something she could not quite put a name to—but the girl herself was really charming. She was flawless; everything about her rang true. A very beautiful woman herself once, Isobel Wentworth liked to be surrounded by youthful fragrance. At the back of her mind she was conjecturing what she could do to help Mary Mallory upon her return to London. Perhaps . . . Bobby . . . but the boy seemed hopeless.

Waiting in the lounge for the car which was to take her to dinner at the Villa Graciosa, she beckoned to a waiter.

"Gustave, please ring up the *Majestic* again and see if Mr. Wingate has returned."

It was too provoking of Bobby to be behaving like this. Why had he taken her so literally? As well as she had been able to gather, he had left his hotel early the previous morning and had not yet returned. Had he said where he was going? No, but he must have made up his mind very quickly because he had not taken any clothes—not even a parcel, the *valet de chambre* had been called to the telephone to testify.

Strange behaviour, of course, but the boy had been annoyed and had probably gone on a short walking tour in sheer bad temper. He would

return purged of his ill-humour, and all would be well again. If he were nice, she would not rub it in too badly about the mistake he had made over Mary Mallory—how well the name suited that sweet girl!

"The *concierge* at the *Majestic* regrets to say, madame, that Mr. Wingate has not yet returned to the hotel."

"Thank you, Gustave."

The man bowed and withdrew.

She might have pondered over the news more if she had not been informed a moment later that the car she was expecting had arrived.

The chauffeur who saluted her at the hotel entrance was not open to criticism; neither was the car—a large Voison saloon—he drove so admirably. The speed with which she travelled on those bumpy roads was not conducive to thought, and Lady Wentworth postponed any further ponderings on the peculiar conduct of her nephew to another and more suitable occasion.

Although she hated to admit the fact, Lady Wentworth was beginning to experience a distinct feeling of uneasiness—indeed, fear was not too strong a word.

From the first she had had suspicions.

The Comtesse, who had greeted her so warmly, had been profuse with lamentations.

"I am afraid I have some disappointments for you, Lady Wentworth," she said, as they walked into the dining-room. "To begin with, Mary is not at all well."

"Oh, I am sorry."

"She's caught a chill or something, I am afraid. She was perfectly all right until lunch-time, but then complained of being shivery. After taking her temperature and finding that it was just over a hundred, I packed her straight off to bed."

"Very wisely, I think. There is a good deal of pneumonia about, I believe. Poor child, I am very sorry; I was so looking forward to seeing her."

"Perhaps you will still be able to. The doctor is coming at eight-thirty again. I hope you will not think it too dull dining alone with me?"

"My dear Comtesse," was the polite rejoinder, "I am quite sure I shall enjoy myself tremendously."

She had—in a way. The food was excellent, the wines well chosen. Whilst for sauce, she had that mysterious quality about her hostess which she had noticed over tea at Les Ambassadeurs the afternoon before. The woman had a strong personality, but whether it was definitely evil she could not yet decide. It was curious that the very evening on which she came to the villa the

girl, who had been the means used to bring her there, should be taken ill. However, until the meal was half over, she decided that the coincidence perhaps went no further than being odd.

They were waited on by a striking-looking maid whom the Comtesse addressed as Nadja. She noticed this girl eyeing her rather curiously from time to time, but it was not until the telephone message for her hostess came that she attached any importance to this behaviour.

"Bother!" exclaimed the Comtesse vexatiously upon returning to the room: "everything has gone wrong to-night. Now we are to have no music. Midal and Sophie Conway have telephoned (they always take engagements together, you know) to say that they find they will not be able to keep their appointment here owing to being kept at the Sporting. I think it disgraceful conduct, and I have a good mind to sue them."

"I doubt if you would receive any satisfaction."

"You are sure you do not mind, Lady Wentworth? You do not blame me too much?"

"Certainly not. Why should I? It is not your fault. Besides—may I make a confession?"

"Do!" The Comtesse leaned forward, an encouraging smile on her lips.

"I am not particularly fond of music. A good orchestra, yes—but my taste isn't developed beyond that. It is a lamentable admission, no

doubt, but I like to be honest. What I propose is that we go to the Casino earlier than we had arranged—but, of course, you would not care to leave your niece," she added quickly.

Before her hostess could reply, there came a startling interruption. A girl, whose night-dress was torn, whose face was drawn and unnaturally white, and whose eyes held terror, burst into the room. One quick, frenzied look round and then, with a tremendous sigh of relief, she rushed at Lady Wentworth.

"They mean to rob you!" she cried; "go away—they're criminals! They've locked me in my room because they thought I suspected and meant to warn you. Go away!... *Pearls*...."

The voice dragged on the last word and then the speaker fell prostrate on the floor.

The visitor rose.

"So that is the explanation, Comtesse"—the icy contempt she put into the last word made even the hardened listener flush. "I had already formed certain suspicions and this poor girl has merely confirmed them." She stooped and raised the unconscious form of Mary Mallory.

"I intend to take this girl, who I am convinced has no relationship with you, back to Cannes. And directly I reach my hotel, I shall make it my business to communicate with the police."

"Pardon, but may I see my patient, please?

I find she is not in her room. Ah! But what has happened here?"

A man, carrying a black bag such as doctors use, stood on the threshold of the room, peering in with inquisitive eyes.

"Doctor Philippe! How thankful I am that you have come!" The Comtesse Zamoyski put intense feeling into the words. "You ask me what has happened? Believe me, I am as much at a loss as yourself—even more so because no doubt you can give me a medical explanation for the extraordinary behaviour of my niece."

"Yes—perhaps." The man with the black bag came further into the room and looked at Lady Wentworth, who still had her arms round the subject of the conversation.

"May I enquire who this lady is?" he asked.

"Pardon! I should have introduced you. Lady Wentworth—Dr. Philippe, who has been attending Mary."

Lady Wentworth acknowledged the bow which the man gave her by the merest nod. She was uncertain whether this man was a genuine medico or merely an additional member of the crooks' gang. In any case, she did not intend to allow the girl who had given her the warning at such risk to herself, to be taken out of her sight.

The man with the bag seated himself.

"Before I make any examination, please tell

me everything that has happened since this afternoon when I paid my first call," he said in precise, formal tones. His English was practically perfect. Assuming that her suspicion concerning him was justified, the Englishwoman had to admit that he might very well be a French doctor with a large cosmopolitan Riviera practice. He was small in build, but dapper in appearance. His horn-rimmed *pince-nez* were extremely professional. His manner, too, appeared brisk and businesslike. If he were a crook, he was also a master actor.

The Comtesse took up her story.

"I had no idea that anything was wrong until a few minutes ago. Lady Wentworth, who has been my guest at dinner to-night, had just mentioned that she thought of visiting the Casino when—you can understand what a terrible shock it was to me—my niece burst in and started raving."

"So."

Dr. Philippe leaned forward, finger-tips pressed together.

"Although I did not mention the fact to you, Madame la Comtesse, this afternoon when I called because of alarming you, perhaps unnecessarily, yet the possibility of mademoiselle's illness taking this form was apparent to me. The brain fever

her of her pearls. Of course, Lady Wentworth did not regard the words seriously."

"On the contrary, I regarded them very seriously indeed."

"Lady Wentworth!"

"You will not frighten me," said the Englishwoman, firmly. "As it happens, my nephew, Mr. Robert Wingate, warned me that you were a criminal. I did not believe him at the time—for which I shall do due penance—but, nevertheless, I took the precaution of placing my jewels in the hotel safe before leaving to-night. Your scheming has been in vain, Madame la Comtesse!"

"I refuse to be insulted like this—I must ask you to leave immediately."

"Not unless I take this girl with me."

Dr. Philippe rose quickly from his chair.

"My first duty is to my patient," he said sternly; "otherwise I would inform you, Lady Wentworth, how thoroughly unfounded your absurd suspicions are concerning the Comtesse Zamoyski. She is, from my personal knowledge, a lady of the highest integrity."

"I scarcely think you are an unprejudiced [illegible]tic."

[illegible] stamped his foot angrily.

[illegible]ture next thing you will say, perhaps, is that [illegible]rles Philippe—am not a fully qualified [illegible] man!"

She stood to her guns.

"You may be a qualified medical man, but my firm conviction is that, like this woman, your associate, you are an unprincipled adventurer; and I refuse to allow you to place a hand on this unfortunate girl."

"But this is intolerable!" exclaimed the Comtesse.

"It would seem that derangement of the little grey cells is not confined to one person in this room," commented Dr. Philippe sardonically; "allow me to ask you, Comtesse, to ring the bell. My first duty, as I have said, is to my patient."

There proved to be no need, however, for the Comtesse to ring, for scarcely had the doctor made the request than a man and woman entered the room. Lady Wentworth recognised the former as being the companion of the Comtesse in the Baccarat Room on the previous evening, whilst the woman was the striking-looking maid who had waited at dinner.

She knew that there would be no further pretence—or delay. These people were in grim earnest; they meant business. Yet she still maintained her composure, standing guard over the unconscious Mary Mallory.

"Get this woman out of the room," ordered the Comtesse.

The two approached her, one on either side.

The expression on their faces was terrifying—the woman's lips were drawn back so that the teeth were shown, whilst the man was smiling in a set, determined manner that evidenced his evil intentions.

Suddenly they flung themselves on her. She tried to strike out with her hands as a man would have done, but against these two merciless assailants she, of course, had no chance from the beginning. It was incredible—but the man actually used his fists, knocking her viciously on the chin so that she collapsed, whilst everything went black about her.

CHAPTER XXVI DELABRAE DRAWS A BLANK

THE manager of the *Majestic Hotel* waved his hands in despair.

"I am desolated, monsieur, but I have told you all I know," he repeated for the fourth time.

Motioning Jessie to remain quiet, a most difficult task in the circumstances, Lord Delabrae turned to the hotel official.

"What it amounts to, then, is this," he stated; "my friend, Mr. Wingate, stayed in this hotel

for three days. Early yesterday morning, for no apparent reason, he rose early and left the place without breakfast."

"That is true, monsieur."

"He told no one where he was going. Nothing has been seen of him since, and no message received. Is that correct?"

"It is perfectly correct, monsieur."

Jessie broke in.

"He must have sent some message," she remonstrated.

"Unless something has happened to prevent him," supplied her companion significantly.

The manager pooh-poohed this suggestion.

"But what you say is impossible, monsieur! What could happen to Monsieur Wingate—here in Cannes?"

"Quite a darned lot!" came the swift, ironic retort; "I suppose this season is no different from any other? There are the same number of crooks here as usual?"

"Monsieur!" expostulated the manager.

"My dear man," rejoined the gossip writer to the *Sun*, "this isn't my first visit to Cannes. Well, since you cannot help us," he concluded, "all I can do is to make enquiries in other quarters."

The manager registered fresh alarm.

"The police? You would not go to the

police, monsieur? That would be ruin for my beautiful hotel!"

"Can't help that—my job is to find my friend, Wingate. I feel pretty certain in my own mind that something has happened to him."

"But, the police, monsieur!"

Delabrae gave a short, hard laugh.

"I'm going to someone higher than any policeman," he stated.

"It's only just round the corner," Delabrae explained to his companion, as they came out on the Croisette again.

"Don't you think it would be better to try to get hold of Lady Wentworth?" asked Jessie.

"No—if you will excuse me saying so. I am going to the one man in France who can give us the most help. This chap Joubert is a big wig in the French Secret Service. I was able to do him a favour about six months ago, when he was over in London on a specially ticklish job, and he promised me then that he would repay me in kind if ever the opportunity arose. As a matter of fact, he is one of the most interesting coves I have ever met; I have kept in touch with him because of that, and also because he is a mine of interesting information. The chap knows the inside story of every big crime that has been committed during the last ten years. Thinking

they would get on together, I gave Bobby a letter of introduction to Joubert. No doubt they have already met. In that case, Joubert will have a personal interest in the matter. Lady Wentworth can wait. If we went to her now, she would probably be too ill to talk."

"And is this man Joubert still in Cannes?"

"He was a couple of days ago, because I had a letter from him. We are going to his flat now."

The speaker turned off the Croisette into the Rue des Etats Unis—an interesting-looking street, lined with smart shops.

Half-way up on the right-hand side, he stopped and verified the number from an envelope which he pulled from his pocket.

"This is it," he announced; "first-floor flat. Now we shall get to know something."

After climbing a well-kept, carpeted staircase, they arrived at a mahogany door which evidently was the entrance to a suite of rooms.

In answer to Delabrae's ring, a man-servant dressed in the French fashion, wearing a sleeved waistcoat and a green baize apron, appeared.

"Your pleasure, monsieur?" he asked in French.

Delabrae rapidly explained that he had called to see Monsieur Paul Joubert.

Instantly a blank expression took the place of the former animation in the man's face.

"But, monsieur," he stated in a puzzled tone, "no M. Paul Joubert lives here. This flat is occupied by Baron Charles Rodel. But the baron is away at the moment in Corsica."

Dick Delabrae, by nature a choleric person, pulled out an envelope from his pocket and shook it in the servant's face.

"Can you deny that this letter was written from this address?" he demanded.

The man took the sheet of paper, glanced at it, and then handed it back.

"I can only presume, monsieur, that this letter is a forgery," he said: "I have already explained that no M. Paul Joubert lives here."

"But I tell you that I am a great friend of Paul Joubert. You are lying to me."

"Monsieur, I protest!" replied the servant, with a great show of dignity. "I merely tell you the truth."

Almost beside himself with temper, Dick caught hold of Jessie's arm and started to walk away.

He felt that he had been made to look a fool in the eyes of the one woman he desired should respect him.

Even more annoying than this, however, was the feeling that he was still drawing a blank. He had not the slightest doubt but that the servant was lying. The letter he had received had cer-

tainly been in Joubert's handwriting, and there had been no doubt about the address. What, then, was the reason of that fellow's prevarication?

Once in the street again, Delabrae lifted his stick to signal a passing taxi.

"Hôtel de Ville," he told the driver.

"I'll get at the truth somehow," he said angrily to the girl. "The police will be sure to tell me when I explain how urgent the matter is. As for that manager fellow, he and his hotel can go to the devil! I have to find Bobby."

The Hôtel de Ville at Cannes is not a prepossessing building. It has a certain external dignity, but, inside, the general effect is one of extreme shabbiness.

It was not without a certain difficulty that the visitors were able to interview a responsible official.

The latter listened more or less patiently to the Englishman's story. But when Delabrae asked for the present address of his friend, M. Paul Joubert, the police functionary looked almost as blank as the servant in the Rue des Etats Unis had done.

"I know no such person," he said curtly; "and, in any case, what you ask is impossible. Agents of the Secret Service are not supposed to have any addresses. As for the disappearance of your friend, Monsieur Wingate, enquiries shall

be put on foot with all dispatch. That is all I can say, monsieur ; I wish you and mademoiselle good day."

Delabrae threatened to raise the roof, but Jessie, using her cooler feminine brain, induced him to leave the building without an explosion.

CHAPTER XXVII THE VILE COMPANIONS

Used to law and order working in the smoothest and most efficient forms, it seemed impossible for her to believe this scene was real.

Lady Wentworth had returned to consciousness to find herself in a room that was absolutely bare of furniture except for a number of cheap chairs. To one of these she was bound by ropes.

Facing her were three other chairs, each occupied. In the centre was the woman whom she knew as the Comtesse Zamoyski. On her right was the cad whose complexion and general appearance led her to think he must be a South American. On the left was the girl who had masqueraded as a parlour-maid at dinner. She could not see the 'doctor'; he, no doubt, was practising some further devilry on that poor child,

Mary Mallory. The thought banished every emotion but indignation.

"I hope you realise what this will mean to you," she said; "you will all be sent to a French prison for a long term of years—and I have always understood that the inside of French prisons is very unpleasant." Her voice was controlled, although it vibrated with passion. Isobel Wentworth was being true to the blood of her ancestors.

The woman in charge of the proceedings waved the words on one side.

"We are a considerable distance from a French prison, my dear Lady Wentworth, and if you are the sensible person I believe you to be, you will listen carefully to what I have to say.

"You are perfectly correct in your surmise that we are after your pearls. We want that necklace and we intend to have it. Indeed our principal object in coming to Cannes was to secure it. Our stay here is proving somewhat expensive, so that we propose to waste no further time. As we hold the cards, you will be well advised not to raise any further difficulty.

"It was, of course, a disappointment—a very real disappointment—that you did not bring the necklace with you to-night. I had hoped and believed that you would wear it, not only for the satisfaction of your own vanity, but as a compli-

ment to your hostess. You will pardon me, I hope, when I say that I consider you were lacking in courtesy in that particular. . . . Wait, please!" the speaker added quickly. "What talking is to be done will be done by me.

"We had made plans, however, to cover eventualities. In case you did not wear the necklace, the gentleman on my right had decided to pay a visit to your room at the *Chester*. The telephone message I received towards the end of dinner was from him. He conveyed the distressing information to me over the wire that the necklace was not to be found. Of course, we were not aware at the time that you had passed the jewels over to the custody of the hotel safe. I wish to take this opportunity of thanking you for that piece of information.

"To get them out of the *Chester Hotel* safe is possible, but it would involve considerable trouble, some risk, and a certain delay. This delay, I frankly admit, would be inconvenient to us at the moment; we have made all arrangements to be out of France as quickly as possible. But we do not intend to go without your necklace. That is the position."

The bound woman replied.

"Your story is very interesting, Comtesse," she commented. "I still call you 'Comtesse' in want of your proper name. No doubt you have

a picturesque enough cognomen in the police records—'Flash Flora' or something like that. That unfortunate girl, Mary Mallory, was employed by you as an unsuspecting decoy, I suppose?"

"She served her purpose in helping us to make your very charming acquaintance, Lady Wentworth. But time is valuable, and I do not propose to waste any more of it by answering your questions. The only matter that counts is your necklace."

The prisoner smiled.

"Which is resting at the moment in an hotel safe that can reasonably be supposed to be burglar-proof. There would seem to be an *impasse*. If I said I was sorry, I should be—lying—and I hate telling lies. It would be interesting to know what you now propose."

"I propose that you lend us your valuable help."

"You flatter me, Comtesse. For a famous criminal—I have no doubt you are famous!—you appear to be a poor judge of character, however. Naturally, you have the power to murder me, but that will not help you in the least—and does not affect me very much. I am an elderly woman, I have lived my life and enjoyed it. As it happens, my heart is not strong, and I do not suppose I should have many more years before me, in any case. Not that I want to die, of

course, but I am willing to do so cheerfully in order to put a stop to this particular ambition of yours. My necklace is a family heirloom. It shall never be touched by your vile fingers."

The man jumped up, but the Comtesse pacified him with a gesture. The girl, however, she was not able to control.

"Listen, you old fool," she said, standing in front of the prisoner and shaking her fist in the other's face; "you think it clever to be so defiant, perhaps. You talk of not being afraid . . . but you do not realise what we can do to you."

"That's enough!" exclaimed the Comtesse. "Nadja, please allow me to deal with this."

The girl, sullen-faced and muttering to herself, went back to her seat.

"There are two things I wish you to do, Lady Wentworth," said the Comtesse, "and I think, after what has just been said, you will decide to do them. I hope so—for your own sake. The first is to telephone to the manager of the *Chester Hotel*, telling him that you are sending a trusted messenger down with a note authorising him to collect the necklace and to bring it back to you here. The manager may have his doubts concerning the wisdom of the procedure, but in face of your written authority he will not dare to refuse the order. There is just one word of warning necessary; you will not say anything

over the telephone which, in our opinion, would be unwise. To do so would be a very foolish proceeding indeed."

"You continue to amuse me, Comtesse," remarked the prisoner; "in return for listening so patiently to the recital of your plans, you will not, I feel sure, deny me the privilege of hearing what is to happen to me—afterwards."

"You will be left in this villa with sufficient food and drink to last you until someone calls. Naturally, we shall cut the telephone wire."

"Very considerate. But, of course, you have guessed already what my answer is: I refuse."

"You refuse?" It was the man who spoke. His face, as he leaned forward, was livid.

"Ah! Do I recognise in your friend the trusted emissary who was to be sent to the *Chester* for my necklace?"

"Stop playing the fool—make her write that letter." Now it was the girl with the beautiful but repulsive face who cut in.

"Leave it to me," again commanded the Comtesse.

"You have not heard all I have to say," the woman proceeded, addressing the prisoner again. "You have told us that you do not fear death—that, rather than allow your jewels to come into our possession, you would willingly die. You may be telling the truth."

"I assure you most earnestly that I am telling you the truth."

"Very well. But, as it happens, your refusal will involve not only your own death but the death of someone who, I may assume, is very dear to you—I refer to your nephew, Mr. Robert Wingate."

"Bobby!"

The name escaped her before she was aware she had spoken. What had these ghouls to do with Bobby?

"I see that my assumption was correct," triumphantly declared the Comtesse. "Lady Wentworth," she went on in a grim tone, "your nephew is, like yourself, a prisoner in our hands, and whether he lives or dies rests entirely with you. In other words, it is a case of your necklace against his life."

She was shaken in every nerve, but still she did not flinch.

"I do not believe a word you say," she returned.

"Perhaps you will be able to recognise your nephew's handwriting?" said the Comtesse, producing a letter. "This is addressed to Mary Mallory, with whom he appears to be in danger of falling in love."

She started to read.

THE prisoner listened with increasing apprehension.

If she had not been a fool she would have taken the advice which the boy had given her. Now it was too late.

"In case you should doubt the genuineness of this letter," the Comtesse said when she had concluded, "you can see the handwriting for yourself."

One glance at the small, neat script was sufficient.

"We had an idea that your nephew was likely to attempt to interfere with our plans and so we took measures accordingly. He was on his way up to this villa early yesterday morning with the object of inducing Mary Mallory to leave when . . . well, why should I pursue a subject which must be very unpleasant to you? It is enough to add that at the present time Mr. Wingate is safely tucked away in a place from which it would take an army of soldiers to rescue him. Those who have been in charge of him merely await one word . . . I trust I make myself clear?"

"And now for your answer," quickly followed the man.

Lady Wentworth, white to the lips, yet held her head erect.

"What you have told me does not make me alter my mind," she said. "Although that letter is in my nephew's handwriting, I have more confidence in Mr. Wingate than to believe he would allow himself to fall into any trap set by you. He was already suspicious, for he had warned me that you were a criminal."

"You still refuse?" José Santos fairly screamed the words. He waved his hands which the prisoner noticed were gloved.

"Yes—I still refuse, you scum!"

Then happened a very dreadful thing.

The man drew a long knife from his pocket. Before he could be stopped, he had rushed forward. . . .

With a long, convulsive shudder which shook her from head to foot, Mary returned to consciousness. The immediate past was so packed with terror that she almost hated to see the light streaming in through the window.

She raised her left arm. She was fully dressed. . . . Then what had happened? The last memory she had was of being in bed with that horrible doctor bending over her.

"You are somewhat unduly excited and require calming," the beast had said—how vividly she could recall the words—"and so I must give you something to quieten your nerves." With that

had come the sharp prick of a hypodermic needle again—she was becoming used to this particular momentary pain—and then forgetfulness.

Had she dressed herself? She could not remember. Where had they taken her? She looked round. But the room was familiar; it was one of the ground floor apartments in the Villa Graciosa.

Then she had not been taken away; she was at home. "Home" . . . how grotesquely ironical the name sounded!

She was still frightfully weak. Every ounce of strength seemed to have been drained from her. Even the simple action of raising her left arm had been exhausting.

But she must get up. Every minute was valuable. She had to inform the police; that devil-woman, the Comtesse Zamoyski, had got Lady Wentworth into her power and . . .

She suppressed the cry of fear that rose to her lips, and endeavoured to scramble to her feet.

What was that? Dear God, what was it?

With a scream that could not be controlled, she sprang up. Fear had now lent her the necessary strength.

One look behind her and she lurched backwards, her whole body throbbing and her hands placed tightly against her mouth.

She must have gone mad. That inanimate thing, lying stiff in death, was Lady Wentworth. She had tried to save her, but must have failed.

They had killed that old lady, murdered her....

But why was *she* there?

It was horrible! But she must not faint. She had to keep her strength. *They* might still be in the villa, and they would try to prevent her getting to the telephone in order to speak to the police.

A feeling of deadly nausea attacked her as she started to walk to the door, but she fought it.

A confused series of noises outside made her hold on to a chair for support. Her heart seemed to turn over. In her present exhausted state, what chance would she have against them?

Then, whilst she was endeavouring to get something of a fresh grip upon herself, the door burst open and a man entered.

He was in uniform, and wore the regulation dress of a *sergent de ville*.

A French policeman.

CHAPTER XXIX AN ARABIAN NIGHT

José Santos strolled into the Casino that night shortly after eleven o'clock. Here was a good alibi in case he should want one. It was too early for the gambling to be at its height, but the Baccarat Room was thronged.

It was Santos's custom to make a scrutiny of the room directly upon entering. Then, selecting what he imagined might be a favourable "prospect," he would proceed to devote the whole of his attention to this particular person. Even on this night—and after what had happened—he made no departure from his usual practice. According to his lights, Santos was conscientious; he never neglected an opportunity.

He quickly made his decision. He was attracted by a dark-skinned man, evidently of Eastern origin, whose brilliant eyes seemed to flash fire, so alive were they as their owner sat at the twenty-louis table.

The man looked not only rich but influential. He had that indefinable air of good breeding and rank which is so unmistakable. Santos decided he must either be an Arab or an Egyptian—probably the former. He had heard that some Arabs were very rich. In any case, the appearance of the man was satisfying enough for his purpose.

Thwarted in one direction, he was not going to leave Cannes until he had made a " killing " of some sort. In the crisis he had proved, surprisingly enough, to be less afraid than the woman who was pleased to call herself the Comtesse Zamoyski.

Usually of an impatient nature, the South American was content now to watch the punters at the twenty-louis table for half an hour without being bored. And this, in spite of the knowledge that every minute was valuable. At the end of this time, however, the man on whom he was centring his attention rose from his seat, having evidently decided to finish playing. As he walked across the room, with the obvious purpose of cashing his *plaques*, his lithe, graceful form made him an arresting figure, even although he was wearing conventional European evening dress.

Santos followed after a brief wait. Although his experience told him that the man he was tracking must be a personality—a man of power and position—he had already determined that he would get to know him by some means or other. The man had been a fairly heavy winner, judging by the number of *plaques* on the table.

He stood by the other's side at the *vestiaire* whilst both collected hats and coats, and, two minutes later, paused on the steps of the Casino. The Arab was then only a yard away.

Putting on his best manner—and this toad of a man could be ingratiating when he had a definite purpose in view—Santos approached the other and asked in a pleasant voice:

"Would it be possible for you to oblige me with a match?"

The other turned quickly. The full, sensitive lips formed themselves into a brilliant smile.

"But yes, monsieur—most certainly." He spoke French with practically a faultless accent.

It was a good beginning, and, having lit his cigarette and handed back the box of matches, Santos proceeded to follow up this initial advantage.

He found the other a ready conversationalist.

"I am from the desert, monsieur," said his companion. "That may surprise you? But, nevertheless, it is true. And I find this Cannes of yours very exhausting. Also, although there are so many people here, I have not yet made any friends. Perhaps you would be kind enough to accompany me back to my villa for supper? I confess I am bored with my own company for the time being."

Another man might have hesitated. A man, that is, who followed an honest purpose in life. Such a man would have weighed the invitation and, in the end, most probably decided against it. But Santos, having only one view—and that

an evil one—jumped at the invitation. But then, it was his purpose in life to get on terms of intimacy with rich and lonely men. And his present need was very urgent. If this gentleman from the desert required companionship, he was willing to supply it.

"I shall be delighted to come for an hour," he replied, after a fitting pause.

"That is most kind of you, monsieur," was the answer.

Signalling a taxi, the Arab gave an address, and soon the musty-smelling vehicle was racketing along towards the Allées.

"I am afraid I am not living in a fashionable quarter, monsieur," explained the host. "I prefer the old—we of the East reverence the past; and that applies, in my case, to districts as well as to other matters. But, pardon," he added quickly, "I should introduce myself. My name is Sidi Ahmed. I am what in Europe you would call a sheik—but not the type, believe me, that one sees on the screen." A light laugh accompanied the amendation.

Santos made some conventional reply, but inwardly congratulated himself. He had not been at fault, then; he had imagined that his companion was a person of rank and power; and he had been proved right. The fellow was also rich, no doubt—he had spoken of his villa. Quite

pleased with the night's results so far, he leaned back and pulled luxuriantly at his heavily-scented cigarette.

The cab stopped outside a building in the Rue Georges Clemenceau. It looked a gloomy-looking villa, protected from the road by a high wall, at the top of which were tall iron spikes, and isolated amidst extensive grounds. But it was just the kind of place that a rich man of somewhat eccentric tastes—such as his present companion would appear to be—might rent for the season. Certainly not fashionable, but quite obviously expensive.

The sheik himself assisted Santos to alight. The man's manners were irreproachable.

Having paid off the driver, Sidi Ahmed did not ring the bell at the entrance, but opened the door with a key which he took from a pocket.

He led the way into an entrance hall that was so dark Santos could not visualise any object clearly.

"I am afraid my servants must have gone to bed," stated his host.

Santos felt a hand on his arm. He had noticed the finely-shaped, nervous fingers of the Arab whilst the latter was gambling at the Casino; but he had not guessed how much power they contained. It was like a steel vice pressing into his flesh.

"Excuse me one moment," said the Arab.

Releasing his hold on Santos's arm, he stepped forward.

"Will you please stay here whilst I find the switch?" he said.

"Certainly."

Santos tried to make his voice sound conventionally polite, but he was beginning to become uneasy. Things were commencing to show themselves in a true balance; the first premonition of something being wrong—very wrong—now took hold of him in stealthy fashion. This dark hall was not a pleasant place; and his host, instead of being the charmingly-mannered man he had met on the steps of the Casino, now assumed, in his imagination, another shape. He did not like Sidi Ahmed one bit; he recognised that he was afraid of him.

He was going to get out—and he was not going to waste any time about it, either. Now that fear had begun to attack him, he felt that this uncanny darkness was closing in upon him like a pall.

He started to move backwards—and in that moment the floor opened beneath him, and he dropped into space.

He was still in darkness—a darkness so intense as to complete the unnerving process which had

been started in the entrance hall above. This gloom might have belonged to a tomb. It was so intense that it almost took on life.

An increasing fear held him captive. José Santos was a common enough type among his noxious breed—he could witness torture being inflicted upon others, but his own blood turned immediately to water at the mere thought of personal pain.

Although he knew himself to be in a desperate position, he lay paralysed with fright for several minutes. His nerves would not act.

Then, cautiously, he started to move, one limb after another. But for that dreadful fear, he might have imagined that he had already died.

Both legs seemed all right, but there was a sharp, agonising pain in his right shoulder. He must have landed upon it when he fell through that cursed trap.

His terror now became so acute that he jumped up. He must escape. Running round like a madman, beating his hands against bare walls, he found that he was imprisoned in a small room that apparently had no door.

He would have squealed, but was afraid that the noise would attract the attention of the Arab—that man, the very thought of whom sent a fresh shudder of terror through his nerves.

Then, whimpering like a frightened animal, he

began to make a fresh tour of his prison. He had only his hands to guide him, and these also had to act as eyes, for the gloom remained so impenetrable that he still could not see a yard in front of him. It was this darkness that was the most terrifying feature of all.

He was still patting the walls with the tips of his fingers—fingers that had become abnormally sensitive—when he felt an electric shock. It was as though a wire brush had been run up his spine. The hair on the back of his head bristled.

"I trust you find everything comfortable, Monsieur Santos?"

The Arab. . . .

He tried to speak, but only succeeded in making an unintelligible sound—something between a gasp and a gulp.

"You may wonder at my peculiar reception of you, Monsieur Santos," continued the mocking voice, which yet had an icy edge to it; "but the circumstances are peculiar. You are a terrorist. By that, I mean that you practise abominations upon inoffensive people. You are an enemy of organised society, and your weapons—it is useless to deny it, for I have full knowledge—are fear and pain. Now it is my will to mete out to you something of what you practise on others."

Santos slumped to the floor. He had always

feared death, but this promised to be worse than death.

"As I told you earlier in the evening," he heard the Arab continue, "I am from the desert. I belong to a sect known as the Hadji. Some of the magic of the Old East has passed into our knowledge. When enemies fall into our hands, we practice upon them. In this way, we learn their secrets. It is through these means that we have become so powerful.

"Now you have a secret, Monsieur Santos, which I am most anxious to learn."

"¡You won't get anything from me, you swine!"

"One of the most offensive things in the eyes of the Hadji is to be personally abusive, Monsieur Santos," was the uncompromising retort. "To assist you in giving the information I require, I would explain that I, as a chieftain of the Hadji, am able to gain my will, no matter how obstinate the other person may be. There have been instances of obdurate persons losing their reason because of their foolish attempt to withhold the information that is required. . . . Now you will please speak. Nothing must be withheld. Understand that."

There came a whimper from the speaker's feet.

Santos, in his extremity, had crawled towards the man, and was now clutching at his ankles.

The Sheik Sidi Ahmed smiled to himself in satisfaction.

MARY listened stupidly.

"Do you mean that I am to be charged with this dreadful murder?" she gasped.

The *sergent de ville*, an aggressive-looking man, with reddish hair and a long moustache, the ends of which he continually caressed, looked at her with avid suspicion.

"I say nothing—as yet, mademoiselle. Allow me to read over to you the notes that I have made. Your name, you say, is Mary Mallory?"

"Yes."

"You are English by birth?"

"Yes."

"Your age is twenty-four years?"

"Yes."

"You have been acting as companion in this villa to a Comtesse Zamoyski?"

"That is correct."

"I find the house empty—why is that?"

"I cannot tell you—I have been ill."

"Mademoiselle, I regret to have to inform you that you must consider yourself under arrest." The *sergent de ville* closed his note-book with a snap. "I now go to telephone to my superiors. Should you make any attempt to escape, I give warning that I shall be compelled to deal roughly with you."

The world swam about her as he left the room.

The Juge d'Instruction ran his fingers through his doormat of a beard, looked round like an actor sensing the "feel" of a theatre crowd, and sat down noisily.

"This is a terrible crime—a scandal to Cannes." The Commissaire of Police, who had accompanied him to the Villa Graciosa, nodded vehemently. It is politic for Commissaires of Police to agree with their superiors—especially when the latter have been called from their bed.

There were four people in that room of tragedy. Three were men, foreigners at that, and the fourth was a girl—herself. The entire resources of the law which these three men represented—and they were tremendous—were arrayed against a girl who was entirely alone. Mary had become so stupefied by shock that since the *sergent de ville* had made his unexpected entry into that same room a short time before, her brain had been too benumbed for thought. She was like someone in a trance. Even now she could scarcely realise the full significance of what was taking place. Her dominant impression was not one of fear but of utter, terrible loneliness.

"It is my duty to enquire into all the circumstances of this terrible crime," announced the Juge d'Instruction, looking round at the chair in

which Mary had been told to sit. "Now please tell me your story as simply as possible. But, first, I ask you one all-important question: Did you kill this Englishwoman, Lady Wentworth?"

"No."

"Well, now tell me your story."

As the tragic narrative proceeded, the Juge d'Instruction made many interruptions. One of these was devastating in its effect upon her.

"You say you did not know that Monsieur Wingate was the nephew of the dead woman?"

Mary gasped. This was the final blow. She felt that nothing that might happen in the future could matter now. She closed her eyes to shut out all sight of this cruel and horrible world.

"Answer me, mademoiselle!" rasped the police official.

"No—I swear I did not know it."

Then came another painful query.

"If, as you say, this Monsieur Wingate is a friend of yours, why have you not sent for him?"

"Because——"

"Yes, mademoiselle?"

"Because, in the first place, I have been unable to think——"

"That is understandable," said the official, looking across at the Commissaire, who nodded in agreement after making sympathetic noises in his throat.

"And in the second place, mademoiselle?" pursued the Juge d'Instruction. The words were purred, and to Mary's excited fancy, the man seated at the table, acting as her judge, took on the shape of a great cat, making ready to spring. What sympathy he might have had towards her was quickly stifled.

Yet she replied.

"There had been a misunderstanding between Mr. Wingate and myself. He had snubbed me in the Casino."

"So! And why did he snub you, mademoiselle?"

"I cannot tell you, unless it was because he saw me seated next to his aunt, playing baccarat."

A look was exchanged between the Juge d'Instruction and the Commissaire.

"Apparently he objected to you being associated with Lady Wentworth?" The remark seemed full of menace.

"I could not say. But he had no reason to object except——"

"Yes, mademoiselle?" encouraged the official, his pen poised.

"That I was connected—although innocently connected—with the woman who called herself the Comtesse Zamoyski." She felt strength returning to her. "Where is that woman?" she continued. "It is she you should cross-examine."

"Unfortunately, she is not here."

"Where is the man Santos, then, whom she said was her nephew? It was he who was to be the thief."

"Alas, mademoiselle, he, too, has vanished."

"There was a girl they called Nadja, and a man with glasses who professed to be a doctor—where are they?"

The official's smile irritated her intensely.

"Perhaps you think that these people exist only in my imagination—that I have invented them?"

"I would not be so ungallant. No doubt, there are such people—but they do not happen to be here."

"But I am—therefore, I am bound to be the murderess? Monsieur, I am innocent, and I will not tolerate such treatment. I demand to be represented by a lawyer—an English lawyer, if there is one in Cannes."

"Justice shall be done, assuredly," was the reply in a somewhat heated tone. "I will myself give you the name and address of an eminent *avocat*. But there are some more questions to be answered first, if you please."

"I repeat, I know nothing beyond what I have already told you."

The man pounced on the reply.

"Do you deny first telephoning and then

writing a letter to the manager of the *Chester Hotel* last night ? "

She gave a short, tragic laugh.

" I was too ill to be able to do anything of the kind even if I had wanted to—the man who claimed to be a doctor made me unconscious through a drug. He used a hypodermic needle —I must have the mark."

She drew up the sleeve of her dress. Against the white skin of the upper part of her left arm, a small red spot showed distinctly.

" Now will you believe me ? " she asked passionately.

The Commissaire of Police coughed. Then he caught the eye of the Juge d'Instruction. The latter beckoned to him and the two conferred together.

Finally :

" Is it permitted to enquire if mademoiselle has contracted the unfortunate habit of taking drugs ? " asked the Juge d'Instruction.

At first the full significance of the question did not occur to Mary, but when it did, she felt she would go mad.

" It is an abominable question," she said ; " how dare you insult me by asking it ? "

" Mademoiselle," returned the official sternly, " I am here to enquire into the brutal murder of a defenceless and harmless woman, and I have

the power to put any question I may think fit. I ask you again if you are in the habit of taking drugs ? "

" Certainly not. This mark was made by the point of the hypodermic needle which that doctor used on me last night."

" Describe this doctor," came the order.

Mary outlined the more salient characteristics of the man whose touch she had loathed.

Again the Commissaire coughed. Again he caught the eye of the Juge d'Instruction, who beckoned to him, and again the two conferred.

At last :

" What you have just said, mademoiselle, certainly throws a somewhat different light on the matter," he started platitudinously, " but there remains much to be explained from your point of view. Ask M. Caron to step inside," he instructed the waiting *sergent de ville*.

CHAPTER XXXI — EVIDENCE FOR THE PROSECUTION

A MINUTE later Mary saw herself being stared at by a pleasant-faced, elderly man with a small goatee beard.

"Do you know this gentleman?" asked the official.

"No. To the best of my knowledge I have never seen him before."

"Until I mentioned it, did you know his name?"

"No—of course not."

"Then," demanded the Juge d'Instruction, bringing his hand down with a thump upon the table, "how do you account for having written this letter to him?"

"I have written no letter to this gentleman of my own knowledge."

"One minute, please." He turned to the hotel manager. "M. Caron, kindly be good enough to inform me if you recognise the voice of mademoiselle as the same voice which spoke to you on the telephone last night?"

"It is difficult to say of a certainty, M. le Juge," he replied; "a voice sometimes sounds so different on the telephone, as you are aware."

"That is so—yet I must request you to answer my question, M. Caron."

The reply was the first encouraging words Mary had heard since the beginning of this harrowing ordeal.

"I am not prepared to say it was the same voice, M. le Juge."

The official sought the eye of the Commissaire.

The latter coughed. M. le Juge beckoned to his subordinate.

The Commissaire was handed a piece of paper. This he held out before Mary's eyes.

"Deny, if you can, mademoiselle, that this letter was written by you last night."

A mist came before her eyes. Here was a fresh mystery. Yes, it was her writing undoubtedly—but she could not remember anything about it. Her mind concerning it was completely blank.

"I demand an answer, mademoiselle."

"Yes, that is my writing; at least, it looks like my writing—but I know nothing about it."

"That is the answer I expected you to give, mademoiselle," the Juge d'Instruction observed satirically. "M. Caron, do you identify this letter as the one which was handed to you in your hotel office last evening at ten o'clock?"

One glance was enough.

"I do." The very reluctance with which the admission was made added to the damning nature of the evidence. Just as the Juge d'Instruction, like all French police officials, was erring on the side of severity, so was M. Caron showing as much sympathy as possible with the accused. His emotion now found expression.

"But, M. le Juge, it is impossible to believe that mademoiselle committed this abominable

crime!" he cried fervently. How he wished now that he had told that Englishman, who had called on him a few hours before at the hotel, everything that had happened. Then, perhaps, this beautiful girl might have been saved this terrible ordeal.

The two police officials exchanged another glance. They might, in other circumstances, have been a pair of stage conspirators.

"I must thank you for your help in endeavouring to solve this crime which you have rightly described as 'abominable,' M. Caron." The inflection of irony was faint but unmistakable. "But now I must ask you to be good enough to read the letter you hold in your hands."

"Is it necessary, M. le Juge?"

"It is more than necessary; it is essential."

M. Caron started his task with obvious reluctance.

Villa Graciosa,
29th January.

Lady Wentworth presents her compliments to Monsieur Caron and will be obliged if he will hand her pearl necklace, which was given to him for safe custody last evening, to the bearer of this letter, which is a confirmation of the telephone message already received.

"There is no signature, monsieur?"

"There is no signature, M. le Juge."

The Commissaire, sitting to the left of the higher official, gave another of his coughs.

"Yes, Piquet?" demanded the Juge d'Instruction somewhat irritably, "what is it now?"

"There was no signature because the woman who should have signed that letter was already dead."

The presiding official held both hands above his head.

"Did you hear that, M. Caron?" he exclaimed. "Is not Cannes fortunate in possessing such a genius of a Commissaire as my friend Piquet? And now will you please inform me exactly what that telephone message referred to in the letter was?"

"The call came through about ten o'clock. I was in my office.

"'Is that the *Hotel Chester*?' asked a woman's voice."

"Mademoiselle's voice?" enquired the Juge d'Instruction.

The witness regarded the official angrily.

"I have already informed you, monsieur, that I am not prepared to say it was the voice of mademoiselle which spoke to me."

"Well, continue, Monsieur Caron," rejoined the other, waving his hands as though intimating

that he was not going to allow the rebuke to have the slightest effect upon him.

"I asked the name of the lady at the other end, and she said she was speaking for Lady Wentworth, who had been dining at the Villa Graciosa in Super-Cannes."

"Did the speaker herself give any name?" snapped the interrogating official.

M. Caron hesitated.

"Come, monsieur!" urged the Juge d'Instruction.

"Yes, she did give a name," replied the hotel manager slowly.

The reply was pounced upon.

"I need scarcely remind you, M. Caron, that it is your duty to tell me that name."

The hotel manager glanced at Mary as though dumbly requesting her pardon.

"The name the speaker gave was Mademoiselle Mary Mallory."

The Juge d'Instruction rose from his chair.

"You hear that, mademoiselle?" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"I know nothing about it," the girl replied; "it must have been someone else using my name in order to divert suspicion from the murderer."

"You think that?"

"My common sense tells me it must be so. As I have told you, I was ill last evening. They

had kept me a prisoner in my room, tied up with ropes. I managed to get free and went downstairs to warn Lady Wentworth. I found that she was already suspicious and about to leave the villa. She was going to take me with her. . . . Then I must have fainted for I cannot remember anything else until I found myself in bed with the man who claimed to be a doctor bending over me, using that dreadful needle. . . . You must believe me, monsieur ! " she pleaded.

" If only I could, mademoiselle," replied the Juge d'Instruction ; " there is, you see, besides the telephone call, the letter which I have here. M. Caron, will you now please continue with your story ? "

The hotel manager did so with considerable reluctance.

" The voice at the other end said that it was Lady Wentworth's intention not to return to the hotel, but that she contemplated going on that night with a party to Monte Carlo. She would be away for at least a week and would require her jewels. Would I please take her necklace out of the safe and hand it, securely packed, to a messenger who would arrive within a short time with a letter confirming the telephone message. I was asked if I quite understood."

" And what did you reply ? "

" I said that the message was quite clear."

"Did you say that you consented to do what was required?"

"No—because I was not asked. After I said that everything was clear, the person at the other end rang off."

"Did the messenger arrive?"

"He did."

"It was a man, then?"

"Yes—a man."

"Describe him, please."

"He was small, dark, with an olive complexion, and looked like a gigolo."

"José Santos!" cried Mary.

"It was he who brought this letter?" showing it.

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I did nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing beyond telling him that in Lady Wentworth's absence I did not feel justified in handing over a necklace which was worth a fortune."

"He referred to the telephone message, of course?"

"Yes—and he insisted that the letter he had brought had been dictated by Lady Wentworth."

"He was troublesome?"

"Very—until I mentioned the possibility of calling in the police."

"What happened then?"

"He expostulated a good deal but finally left."

"Having seen the effect of this threat, why did you wait until this morning before informing the authorities?"

"There were two reasons. In the first place, I waited for Lady Wentworth's return—by this time, of course, I realised that the telephone message and the letter represented an attempt to obtain possession of the necklace—and secondly, I did not wish to bring the name of a distinguished guest into any disagreeable notoriety. I knew that Lady Wentworth—a lady for whom I had the greatest possible respect—was extremely sensitive in such a matter."

"Your consideration reflects credit on you, M. Caron, but I must point out at the same time that if you had rung up the Hôtel de Ville immediately, we should have captured the whole gang of these assassins and not merely one."

"It would have been better, M. le Juge; perhaps then you would have arrested the real murderer."

There was a fresh hint of reproach in the hotel manager's voice, and the official tugged angrily at his beard.

"I intend to arrest Mademoiselle Mallory in any case," he declared.

Mary uttered a low moaning cry. She was to be arrested—thrown into prison. What was it she had heard about the inside of French prisons being very unpleasant indeed? She could well believe it if the same police methods obtained in them as she had been the victim of that day. She had thought she had courage but she couldn't stand this.

"I am innocent," she cried.

"Of course you are!" shouted a voice in reply; "and let any damned Jack-in-office try to prove otherwise!"

At first she imagined she must be dreaming. For there, standing in the doorway, was Bobby Wingate.

"Mary!" he shouted, and rushed towards her.

CHAPTER XXXII — THE MYSTERIOUS M. JOUBERT

"Oh, my dear!"

Her secret was out, but what did she care? All her troubles seemed over now that this man's arms were about her.

"Silence!" roared the Juge d'Instruction;

"who are you, monsieur, to come rushing in like this, interrupting a judicial enquiry?"

Wingate, releasing his hold of Mary Mallory, turned to the official and bowed. His clothes were in rags, his face and hands were cut and begrimed, he looked a thoroughly deplorable sight—and yet he was unmistakably a gentleman.

"Monsieur le Juge," he said, "I ask your pardon. My name is Robert Wingate, and I have come here to give you what assistance is possible."

The official raised his eyebrows.

"You are aware that the victim of this abominable crime is Lady Wentworth, your aunt?" he enquired.

Wingate staggered.

"Tell me—is she dead?"

A note of sympathy crept into the official's voice.

"Alas! monsieur, I regret to say she is. But rest assured that justice will be done."

"The devils! But I was afraid of it. The people from whom I have been lucky enough to escape hinted as much."

"Did they also give you the name of the murderer?"

"They did not. But I can tell you that it was one of three people."

"Their names, monsieur?"

"A woman calling herself the Comtesse Zamoy-

ski, a Russian girl known as Nadja, and a man, José Santos. Most probably it was the latter. He is a dope fiend and in moments of excitement is not responsible for his actions."

"You appear to have a very extensive knowledge of this crime, monsieur," commented the Juge d'Instruction. "It is unusual, in my experience, for criminals to talk so freely of their misdeeds."

"Not when they believe they have a victim completely at their mercy. Listen, Monsieur le Juge"——Wingate swayed before he could complete the sentence, and, pressing his hand over his heart, leaned against the wall for support.

"Can't you see he's ill?" cried Mary. "Get him some brandy."

M. Caron, who had been a silent but interested witness since the dramatic entry of Wingate, walked across to the girl.

"Courage, mademoiselle," he said in a voice which gave her confidence; "your troubles will soon be over. Truth will prevail. The good God will attend to that. As for monsieur, he has been badly treated, but he will recover. See, M. le Juge is already giving instructions."

At a few whispered words from the interrogating official, the *sergent de ville* left the room.

"I have sent for some cognac, monsieur," he explained.

"That—is—very—kind—of—you," answered Wingate weakly. By the time he took to utter the words, he showed how utterly spent was his condition.

"May I suggest that you should sit down until the cognac arrives," now said the official, and the Commissaire himself hurried forward with a chair.

A couple of minutes later the policeman returned. He carried a bottle in his right hand.

"I couldn't find any cognac, M. le Juge," he said, "but here is a bottle of wine."

"Give it to Monsieur Wingate," roared the official.

After taking a few sips, a remarkable change could be seen. Colour came back into the pallid cheeks. The Englishman gave a confused laugh.

"I'm sorry to be such an ass—but I haven't had any food since the night before last. No," raising a hand, "it doesn't matter. I want to tell you what I know, and then I'll be getting along to my hotel. But first of all, will you please tell me, Monsieur le Juge, what Mademoiselle Mallory is doing here?"

The official frowned.

"She is charged with being concerned in this atrocious murder," he replied.

"Good God, man—it's absurd! She is as innocent as I am!"

"What proof have you of that, monsieur?"

"This," came the reply without the slightest hesitation. "I had known for some time that these crooks—I mean the Zamoyski woman and that chocolate-coloured hound Santos principally—were after my aunt's jewels. I warned her repeatedly, but she was an obstinate—I mean a strong-minded woman, and she would not listen. Her attitude was that she was fully capable of looking after herself. She would not believe there was any real danger.

"Realising how hopeless it was to try to persuade her otherwise, I made an arrangement with Miss Mallory here. Please let me do the explaining," he added hastily, as the girl seemed about to say something.

"Miss Mallory, whom I had met in London, entered this supposed Comtesse's service as an adventure. She did not know the woman was a criminal, of course.

"The first morning Miss Mallory was in Cannes, when I met her on the Croisette she confided in me her suspicion that the Comtesse was a crook, that she believed the woman was after the pearls of some rich visitor—she didn't know at the time that the latter was my aunt—but, all the same, we entered into an agreement together. She was to pretend to be innocent, and then, when she had obtained all the necessary information, she

was to let me know, and I was to pass the news on to my friend, Paul Joubert——"

"And who, pray, is this Monsieur Paul Joubert!" enquired the Juge d'Instruction.

"He is an important person in the French Secret Service—and my very great friend," replied the Englishman impressively.

"He sounds to me like a character out of a novel," was the rejoinder. "I confess I have never heard of him."

For a moment Bobby's heart seemed to sink right down into his boots. Was it possible that Delabrae, who was an incurable practical joker, had been pulling his leg? Suppose the letter of introduction that he carried was valueless—because it concerned a mythical personage? In that case, he was most probably doing Mary Mallory a disservice because the prejudice of this pompous ass would be increased.

He had to take this risk, however.

"That does not alter the fact that M. Joubert is, as I have said, in the Secret Service—and that, to the best of my knowledge, he is still in Cannes." He had to bluff it out.

"And who told you that, may I ask?"

"Another friend, Lord Delabrae, the English nobleman."

The official's displeasure became more marked.

"Lord Delabrae," he repeated; "I remember

him. He came to Cannes last year and wrote a number of disparaging articles for some English paper. He had the impertinence to say that he was willing to bet a thousand francs he could commit any crime in Cannes and—what was his abominable expression?—get away with it!"

Wingate burst into a laugh—then realised he had made a grave mistake.

"Enough!" roared the Juge d'Instruction, who seemed labouring under the impression that his personal dignity was suffering; "I waste no more time. You say you had an arrangement with the accused that she should communicate particulars of this crime to you. It is an impossible story, and, frankly, I do not believe it. Indeed this letter, which Mademoiselle Mallory has admitted is in her handwriting, is sufficient evidence for me to cause her arrest."

"You can't do that," replied Wingate.

"How dare you say that I cannot do it?" cried the enraged official. "Piquet," he shouted, turning to the Commissaire of Police, "take the accused to the Hôtel de Ville."

Wingate rushed forward and placed himself in front of the girl.

"No; please don't," Mary pleaded; "everything will be all right. You will get yourself into trouble if you interfere."

M. Caron added his entreaties to those of the girl.

"I will find Monsieur Joubert for you," he added.

"You know Joubert?" gasped Bobby. It seemed as though the luck was turning at last.

The hotel manager bent his head to whisper.

"He is a friend of mine—I smiled when le Juge suggested that he was merely a figure of imagination. He is that, of course, but is made of flesh and blood all the same."

By this time the Commissaire had his hand on Mary's arm.

"I regret, mademoiselle, that I have my duty to perform," he said apologetically.

"Do not resist," whispered M. Caron. "I will go to find Paul Joubert. You will excuse me now, M. le Juge?" he asked, turning to the official and speaking in a louder tone. "My presence is demanded back at the hotel."

"You have permission to withdraw, M. Caron," was the gracious rejoinder.

"Come, mademoiselle," said the Commissaire.

"My God, this is damnable!" cried Bobby. He was looking at the girl he now knew he loved. Her face was white and drawn; she appeared on the point of collapse.

"She is innocent!" he shouted at the Juge d'Instruction.

"In France, I would remind you, monsieur, an

accused person is held to be guilty until their innocence is definitely established."

"An iniquitous system!" replied Wingate—and then the door opened.

A man at whom everybody stared stood on the threshold.

There was a tense silence whilst the visitor—a tall, well-built man with distinguished features and keen, searching eyes—looked round.

Then M. Caron rushed forward.

"*Mon cher Monsieur Joubert!*" he exclaimed.

Joubert!

"Are you Paul Joubert?" Bobby Wingate, in two leaps, was by the stranger's side.

"That is my name," replied the other. "But, first, please allow me to speak to M. le Juge d'Instruction."

The latter frowned, but the look of displeasure was soon replaced by an expression of amazement.

"But this is incredible!" he exclaimed, when the visitor had finished speaking. "You say the man has confessed?"

"In a vain endeavour to try to save himself from going to Devil's Island."

Wingate broke in.

"What's this about someone confessing?" he demanded. "Monsieur Joubert, you have come at the right moment. My name is Wingate—Robert Wingate—and I have a letter of intro-

duction to you from my friend, Lord Delabrae. I should have got into touch with you before."

The distinguished-looking man smiled.

"Had you done so, I am afraid you might have been disappointed," he said. "I have not been available to anyone in Cannes during the last few days—that is, apart from certain criminals. I have just heard that Lord Delabrae has been searching for me."

"Delabrae!" returned Wingate. "Is he in Cannes?"

"So I am given to understand. You will be meeting him quite soon."

"Well, he can wait for the time being," went on Wingate. "Look here, Joubert, the Juge d'Instruction insists upon arresting my fiancée" —he indicated Mary—"upon a perfectly preposterous charge of murdering my aunt, Lady Wentworth."

Paul Joubert bowed.

"Monsieur Wingate, and you, Mademoiselle Mallory," he said, "allow me to bring you good news. I have arrested the real murderer. His name is José Santos, and he has made a full confession. This morning I crossed the frontier into Italy and, with the help of the police authorities, arrested two women at an obscure hotel forty miles from Mentone. They have lately been occupying this villa, I understand."

"WHY did you say I was your fiancée?" asked Mary.

They were seated in the most secluded corner of the dining-room of a wayside inn high above Monte Carlo. To escape from Cannes for a few hours after the terrible experiences which had befallen them there had been imperative. The air "of the town of flowers and sports"—how grimly ironical the advertisement phrase returned to Mary's memory—had become intolerable. News of the tragedy had not leaked out—particulars of crimes committed on the Riviera have a mysterious way of never finding their way into the newspapers—but the place seemed haunted.

"I scarcely realised what I was saying," Wingate said. "You must try to forgive me—I had no right, of course. Are you very angry?"

"No, I am not angry with you—how could I be angry?—but I don't think I shall ever be able to forgive myself. What a fool I've been! There were so many things to warn me, and I pushed them all on one side. I thought I was being clever, independent, self-reliant. . . ."

"You have proved yourself the bravest woman I have ever known," Wingate said.

"No, I wasn't a bit brave; I was terrified. . . ."

At the memory, she caught hold of his hand and clung to it.

He put his arm about her.

"I'll take you straight back to England," he said; "there you'll be able to forget. Everything's settled now. Why, even that Juge d'Instruction is satisfied."

"But I'm not."

"You're not?"

"No. I should like to know how they made me write that letter to the manager of the *Chester* —because I *did* write it, you know; at least, it was in my handwriting."

"Joubert will know," answered Wingate confidently; "what a wonderful chap that is!"

"He's been very wonderful to us," she agreed.

They lingered as long as they could, and then, wrapping her carefully into her seat, Bobby turned the car towards Cannes.

"You will stay at the *Majestic* to-night," he said.

She nodded. She had neither the strength nor the will to argue. Besides, being looked after in this way was very comforting.

Almost the first person they met in the hall of the hotel was Jessie Stevens.

"You look as though you were just about to

start on a honeymoon," she said with her usual appalling frankness.

Before either could reply to this embarrassing comment, Delabrae strolled up, in company with Paul Joubert.

"More good news," announced Delabrae; "didn't I tell you that this fellow Joubert was a marvel?"

The French Secret Service man bowed to his sponsor.

"Yes," he said, in a tone of ironical self-congratulation, "I must admit that I am irresistible and all-conquering!"

"What a pity it is you are already married!" stated Jessie Stevens, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Ah! If that were not so, mademoiselle——"

Joubert, with Gallic gallantry, took the girl's hand and raised it to his lips.

"What has happened now?" asked Wingate, with British practicality.

"Only that Joubert has arrested the last of the gang."

Bobby, holding Mary's hand tightly to give her courage, replied:

"The bogus doctor fellow?"

Joubert answered.

"Yes—'bogus doctor' is the correct name for the *canaille*. He is a professional criminal,

specialising in drug smuggling and hypnotism. That's how he got into touch with Santos, who is what you call a 'dope fiend.' If the police here had had any sense, they would have arrested him long ago. He must have given them sufficient cause for suspicion long before this present affair."

"Do you mean I was hypnotised?" enquired Mary.

"There is no doubt about it, mademoiselle. It is an old trick, but sometimes a very effective one. I have not the least question that the letter to our friend Caron of the *Hotel Chester* was written by you, mademoiselle, whilst you were in an hypnotic state, and under the direct influence of this man Philippe."

Wingate threw his shoulders back like a man relieved of a great burden.

"That clears up the whole rotten business," he said. "Mere thanks seem a very poor return for what you have done for us, Joubert—but I know you will take my word for it that we are both very grateful."

"*Alors!* But it was all in the day's work! Now, *mon ami*," he continued, turning to Delabrae, "I will tell you a story which you must not print. You understand that?"

"Oh, hell!" groaned the gossip writer in deep chagrin; "what's the use of telling me stories I can't print?"

The Frenchman caught the lobe of the other's ear.

"Now, attend! But, remember," grinning like a mischievous schoolboy, "not one word must appear in your newspaper. Otherwise, I, the great Joubert, will have no weapons left when I undertake a fresh case! You promise?"

"Oh, all right. What is this tale of blood and glory?"

"But, first, we will sit down. Mademoiselle!" The French Secret Service man drew forward a chair for Mary, who was still looking very pale.

"You wonder, perhaps, why, when you called at my flat in the Rue des Etats Unis, my servant—oh, yes," with another mischievous laugh, "the faithful Etienne was my servant—told you such a deliberate lie? Well, the truth was that I was engaged on a very particular case here in Cannes. It was an affair demanding the utmost secrecy. Even to you, *mes amis*, I cannot tell the whole truth—but, let it suffice that it concerns something relating to Africa and our policy there.

"It was necessary for me to disguise myself as an Arab—true, I was an Arab of position—nothing short of a sheik, in fact. Mademoiselle," he said, turning to Jessie Stevens, his eyes bubbling with mirth again, "do you not think I made a good sheik?"

"I am quite certain you were perfectly adorable. If you had a tent or a caravan or a wigwam or something, I would ask you to lead me to it."

Delabrae waved an admonitory finger.

"Steady on, there," he said in mock earnestness.

Joubert continued his narrative.

"It was whilst I was impersonating the Sheik Sidi Ahmed, that the rat Santos came into the Casino. He must have been full of dope; otherwise, where could he have found the courage to have remained in Cannes whilst his associates hurried away into Italy? With the blood of his foul crime still on his hands, he came into the Baccarat Room looking for another victim —the first having disappointed him.

"He saw me—ah!—he did not know the truth! He considered I was what you call 'easy game.' But it was a case of checkmate!" declared the speaker. "On the pretence of inviting him to supper at the villa which this rich sheik had engaged, I took him to an empty house that has been useful to me on more than one occasion. There, I filled him with hocus-pocus about my belonging to some secret Arab Society, who tortured their victims in order to get information out of them—if it had not been so serious, I might have spoilt everything by laughing!"

"Did you know then, Joubert, that Santos had killed Lady Wentworth?"

"No. I confess it freely. What I believed was this: that Santos was mixed up in some obscure way—that he stood on the fringe, as it were—of the case I was then investigating. As it happened, I was entirely wrong. But, imagine my surprise, when he told me of a crime I knew nothing about! The rest was comparatively easy. The need was so urgent that I crossed at once to Italy. It took me some hours to locate the fugitives—but, thanks to *le bon Dieu*, I arrived in time."

If Paul Joubert had not been a successful Secret Service agent, he would have made a great actor.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, speaking now in the tongue of his auditors, "I am always at your service."

Bowing his way to the door, he made an effective exit.

CHAPTER XXXIV — ORANGE BLOSSOMS FOR TWO

LOOKING out of the window, Mary saw the rain descending in sheets. It was a day to chill and discourage the most optimistic, but in her heart was a happiness which nothing could effect.

Dear old London! That was the song in her heart. Let those who liked it have the sunshine and the hectic gaiety of the Côte d'Azur; she had seen behind the mask and the sight had sickened and terrified her. It could rain as hard as it liked; fogs and hurricanes could do their worst; she was glad to be home.

Home! That blessed word. . . . At present it consisted merely of a couple of rooms in a Bloomsbury apartment house, but she was content. She kept telling herself she was the happiest person in the world—certainly the very happiest girl. . . .

Through the pouring rain came a smart two-seater car. It stopped with a flourish, and a man, almost in the same instant, leaped out upon the pavement.

In two strides he was at the front door, in another he was inside the hall.

"My dear!" he said breathlessly—that was all.

When the door was closed behind them, Mary

smiled at her visitor over the roses which he had brought.

"I suppose it is all right for a bashful maiden to receive a gentleman visitor alone in her sumptuous apartments," she said.

"All right? I'd like the rest of the world to try to keep me out!" challenged Bobby Wingate; "and as for this"—waving a hand round the poorly-furnished room—"you're going to say good-bye to it straight away."

"Oh, indeed?"

"Yes. I have spoken. Mary, dear, if you put your hand inside my coat pocket—and promise not to tickle—you'll find a present."

"But you've already brought me these wonderful roses."

Her accepted lover smiled.

"You'll find something far more interesting in that pocket than mere roses."

"Could anything in this world be more interesting than roses?"

"Yes!" he replied with a flash of inspiration; "roses fade—but the—er—the other thing will never die—not so far as I am concerned."

She drew out a long envelope and took from it a thick piece of paper which crinkled. This she studied whilst the blood mounted into her cheeks.

"A special licence!" she cried faintly.

"I couldn't wait, dear," he explained. "Mary, if you won't marry me at once, I'll——"

The remainder of the sentence was left unfinished. Like the rest of mankind, Bobby was not able to solve the problem of continuing a speech at the same moment that he was kissing a girl.

As it happened, there was a double wedding.

No prize is offered for the names of the other contracting parties.

THE END